Workshy Whitehall *James Heale* / The art of changing your mind *Douglas Murray*

23 APRIL 2022 | £5.25

WWW.SPECTATOR.CO.UK | EST. 1828

THE SPECTATOR

The survivor

How much longer can Boris Johnson keep going, asks *Katy Balls*

Shanghai won't be silenced
Cindy Yu

Disney's decorative arts
Laura Freeman

My chat with God
Rod Liddle

CANADA C$8.25, EURO ZONE €7.75, SOUTH AFRICA ZAR99.90.

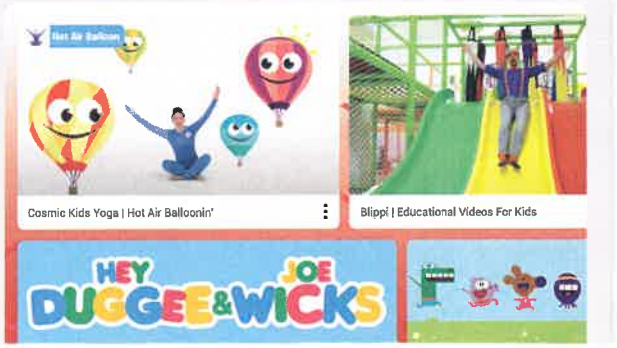
9 770038 695202 16

YouTube Kids

Choose content settings by age

Guide their adventures

The YouTube Kids app includes parental controls so you can customise your child's experience



YouTube helps keep your family safer online
Visit **youtube.com/kids**

Simplified representation of YouTube Kids product. Parent setup required.

THE SPECTATOR
ESTABLISHED 1828

The long haul

The first few weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine went so badly that it was tempting to see the withdrawal of troops from around Kyiv as the beginning of the end. The loss of the battleship *Moskva* has humiliated Vladimir Putin further, undermining any lingering hope he may have had of being able to claim total victory in time for Russia's military celebrations on 9 May.

But it would be a dangerous delusion to think that Russia's invasion of Ukraine is destined to be a failure. Heroic though Ukraine has been so far, its struggle could yet be lost. As the conflict enters a critical new phase, it is vital that Britain does not relax military support for the country. Indeed, it is time to step it up.

By giving up on his efforts to capture Kyiv and thereby force a rapid surrender of the whole of Ukraine, Putin has started to fight the war which many in the West assumed he would fight in the first place: attempting to annex the regions of Luhansk and Donetsk, which together make up the Donbas in the east of Ukraine. Not only are these areas potentially easier to capture, sharing a 200-mile-long border with Russia and filling in a gap between Russia and the already annexed Crimea, but Russian forces can expect resistance to be lighter. Both Luhansk and Donetsk are already under the control of breakaway pro-Russian regimes, styling themselves as 'people's republics'. It is highly likely that Putin will attempt the same trick here as he succeeded in pulling off in Crimea in 2014: to assert military control and then hurriedly hold some kind of referendum which he hopes would give a sense of legitimacy to their annexation.

If Putin is allowed to keep taking territory from neighbouring countries, it is certain that he will keep coming back for more, using the excuse that he is merely defending Russian speakers who are being oppressed. It is the same excuse Hitler used about German speakers in the Sudetenland. Given that most of Russia's neighbours spent 70 years as part of the Soviet Union, inevitably large numbers of Russian speakers reside within them. Like Ukraine, the Baltic states have large numbers of people who identify as Russian – around 25 per cent of the population in the case of Latvia. Any kind of green light given to Putin over Luhansk and Donetsk could lead him to eye up the Baltic states, in part or as a whole. That, needless to say, would bring Nato into direct conflict with Russia.

Altogether, the battle for the Donbas presents a potentially more straightforward target for Russian aggression. In the battle for Kyiv, Russia had condemned its troops – many of them conscripts who had been misled about the nature of the undertaking they had joined – to a grubby fight for urban territory. Add to that a well armed and motivated civilian population and the error of trying to enter the city via an exposed tank column, and Russian forces were always likely to be bogged down. In Donbas, where there is a lot of open ground, the topography will be more favourable to a Russian advance and less favourable to embedded defence.

Any kind of green light over Luhansk and Donetsk could lead Putin to eye up the Baltic states

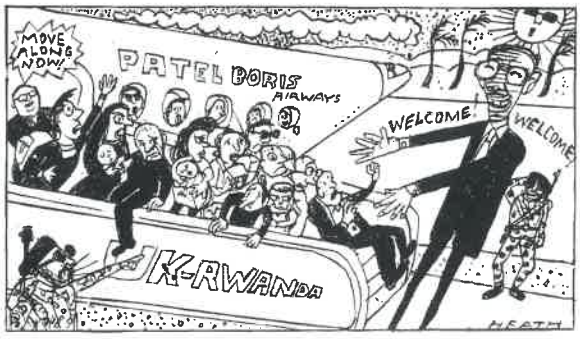
Drier conditions can be expected as summer approaches, and Russian forces can be fed via shorter supply lines than those near Kyiv. Russian forces – even badly motivated ones – have already been able to gain territory in Donbas in a way that proved harder in Kyiv and the north. Smaller cities – such as Kreminna, with a population of 18,000, which fell this week – have proved easier pickings. Most of Mariupol now lies in Russian hands, the native population all but driven out and 95 per cent of buildings damaged or destroyed.

So far, Ukraine's allies have shown they recognise the urgent need to keep up the supply of military equipment, and have responded to President Zelensky's requests, if not in full then at least with substantial donations. The UK government has announced that it will send anti-aircraft vehicles, allowing Ukrainian forces to target Russian aircraft more accurately than they can with shoulder-based weapons. The US has sent $800 million worth of artillery equipment. The Netherlands this week announced it will send armoured vehicles, which are essential if Ukraine is to fight on open ground.

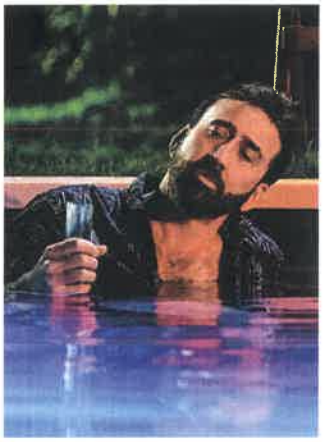
But there needs to be an awareness in the West that this campaign is for the long haul, and that it will require accompanying humanitarian support. Military budgets across European countries must be increased to aid the supply of weapons to Ukraine. And pressure must continue to be applied on Germany to step up its meagre offerings. Short of regime change, it is hard to see Russia giving up on its campaign in the near future, given the resources and political capital which Putin has invested in it. Having drummed into his people the falsehood that Russia is engaged in a fight to 'liberate' Ukraine, he cannot now go back.

The reality is that Ukraine is likely to be engaged in an attritional campaign against Russian forces for years to come. Its economy, already shattered in the past few weeks, will remain suppressed and its people in need of continuing support to fight. Ukraine applied for but was never accepted as a member of Nato. Nevertheless, it is imperative that the democratic world continues to make it clear that Ukraine is one of us and will not be abandoned.

On the clock, p42



Flight of fancy, p26



Gilded Cage, p49

THE WEEK

3 **Leading article**

6 **Portrait of the Week**

9 **Diary** I'm out to annoy the world
Piers Morgan

10 **Politics**
Reasons not to be cheerful
James Forsyth

11 **The Spectator's Notes**
Putin's argument is blood
Charles Moore

17 **Rod Liddle**
My phone call with God

21 **Douglas Murray**
When belief meets fact

25 **Barometer** Gladstone, asylum, unfair fares, fines

27 **Julie Burchill**
The rise of the awful 'empaths'

28 **Ancient and modern**
Morale failure

29 **Letters** Soft power, fuel tax, holy wars and climate panic

31 **Any other business**
A memo to Elon Musk
Martin Vander Weyer

12 **Boris fights on**
But will he survive?
Katy Balls

13 **Maitreyabandhu**
'Homes Under the Hammer': a poem

14 **Energy savings**
Learning to love my eco-home
Emily Hill

16 **The narcissist vs the fantasist**
That's the choice facing France
Jonathan Miller

19 **Conflict of opinion**
Russians' support for the war
Jade McGlynn

22 **Workshy Whitehall**
Too few civil servants are back in the office
James Heale

24 **Art attack**
Will AI replace painters?
Sean Thomas

26 **Hotel Rwanda**
Dirty dealings with Paul Kagame
Michela Wrong

28 **Shanghai's shame**
China's lockdown protestors cannot be silenced
Cindy Yu

BOOKS & ARTS

BOOKS

32 **Jane Ridley**
Five Love Affairs and a Friendship, by Anne de Courcy

33 **Hugo Williams**
'Soul Singer': a poem

34 **David Sexton**
Interventions, by Michel Houellebecq
Houman Barekat
Imaginary Languages, by Marina Yaguello

35 **Madeleine Feeny**
Trespasses, by Louise Kennedy

36 **Katja Hoyer**
Nazi Billionaires, by David de Jong

37 **Stuart Jeffries**
Ways of Being, by James Bridle

38 **Nancy Campbell**
'sculptures of Ancient Rome': a poem
Bart Van Es
Mad About Shakespeare, by Jonathan Bate

40 **Keith Miller**
The Poisonous Solicitor, by Stephen Bates
Diana Hendry
The Candy House, by Jennifer Egan

Cover by Morten Morland. **Drawings** by Michael Heath, Castro, Kipper Williams, RGJ, Grizelda, Len Hawkins, Mark Wood, Royston, K.J. Lamb, Wilbur, Robert Thompson. www.spectator.co.uk **Editorial and advertising** The Spectator, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP, Tel: 020 7961 0200, Email: letters@spectator.co.uk (for publication); advertising@spectator.co.uk (advertising); Advertising enquiries: 020 7961 0128 **Subscription and delivery queries** Spectator Subscriptions Dept., 17 Perrymount Rd, Haywards Heath RH16 3DH; Tel: 0330 3330 050; Email: customerhelp@subscriptions.spectator.co.uk; **Rates** for a basic annual subscription in the UK: £111; Europe: £185; Australia: A$279; New Zealand: A$349; and £195 in all other countries. To order, go to www.spectator.co.uk/A263A or call 0330 3330 050 and quote A151A; **Newsagent queries** Spectator Circulation Dept, 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP, Tel: 020 7961 0200, Fax: 020 7681 3773, Email: dbrown@spectator.co.uk; **Distributor** Marketforce, 161 Marsh Wall, London, E14 9AP. Tel. 0203 787 9001. www.marketforce.co.uk **Vol 348; no 10,104**

© The Spectator (1828) Ltd.

ISSN 0038-6952 The Spectator is published weekly by The Spectator (1828) Ltd at 22 Old Queen Street, London SW1H 9HP
Editor: Fraser Nelson

Muse and monster, p32

Yeast resistance, p9

Watch this space, p24

LIFE

41 **Tibor Fischer**
The War on the West, by Douglas Murray

ARTS

42 **Laura Freeman**
Disney's rococo roots

44 **The listener**
Father John Misty: Chloë and the Next Twentieth Century
Rod Liddle
Theatre
The 47th; For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy
Lloyd Evans

46 **Exhibitions**
Richard Batterham: Studio Potter
David Sexton

48 **Television**
Chivalry; Life After Life
James Walton

48 **Podcasts**
The Last Bohemians; How To Academy
Daisy Dunn

49 **Cinema**
The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent
Deborah Ross

LIFE

54 **High life** *Taki*
Low life *Jeremy Clarke*

55 **Robert Stein**
'Ben Nicholson Throws a Rubber Shark at Eileen Agar Polzeath, July 1937': a poem

56 **Real life** *Melissa Kite*
Bridge *Janet de Botton*

57 **Wine club** *Jonathan Ray*

AND FINALLY...

52 **Notes on...** Hitchhiking
Charlie Metcalfe

58 **Chess** *Luke McShane*
Competition *Lucy Vickery*

59 **Crossword** *CheeseCracker*

60 **No sacred cows**
Toby Young
Battle for Britain
Michael Heath

61 **Sport**
Roger Alton
Your problems solved
Mary Killen

62 **Food**
Tanya Gold
Mind your language
Dot Wordsworth

Spite is the Tabasco in the Bloody Mary of life.
Julie Burchill, p27

I regard Twitter as a satanic cacophony of misinformation and vanity. If that puts me in the position of the late-15th-century scholar who said 'Printing presses? Pah! The only news I trust is handwritten by monks', so be it.
Martin Vander Weyer, p31

Trying to learn about American politics from this play is like watching porn to find out how to fix a bathroom shower.
Lloyd Evans, p44

CONTRIBUTORS

Jade McGlynn, who says on p19 that Russian support for the war will continue to grow, is a specialist in foreign policy at the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies.

Sean Thomas is a journalist who has written novels under the pen names Tom Knox and S.K. Tremayne. On p24 he explores AI's ability to create art.

Jane Ridley, who writes about Nancy Cunard's sexual adventures on p32, is a historian whose latest book is *George V: Never A Dull Moment*.

Katja Hoyer is a German historian and author of *Blood and Iron: The Rise and Fall of the German Empire 1871-1918*. She writes about the Nazis' cash on p36.

Bart Van Es, who assesses the literary memoir of the Shakespearean scholar Jonathan Bate on p38, is an author and professor of English literature at Oxford.

PORTRAIT OF THE WEEK

LUCKILY THE PRIME MINISTER WAS IN RWANDA AT THE TIME

Home

Boris Johnson, the Prime Minister, told the House of Commons that it did not occur to him that the gathering in the Cabinet Room on his birthday (for which he had been issued a fixed-penalty notice) could amount to a breach of the rules on coronavirus. 'That was my mistake and I apologise for it unreservedly,' he said. He packed his bags for a visit to India to coincide with a Commons debate on whether he had misled parliament. Priti Patel issued a ministerial direction (the second in the Home Office in 30 years) to implement a scheme whereby people deemed to have entered Britain unlawfully since 1 January could be flown to Rwanda, where they would be allowed to apply for the right to settle there. More than 6,000 people had crossed the Channel in small craft in 2022.

In the seven days up to 17 April, 1,289 people had died with coronavirus, bringing total deaths (within 28 days of testing positive) to 171,396. In the previous week 1,613 had died. Numbers with Covid remaining in hospital in the United Kingdom fell from about 20,000 to about 19,000. The NHS said that patients in waiting rooms would no longer have to observe social distancing. Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Cabinet Office minister, said that civil servants must stop working from home and return to the office. Sir Harrison Birtwistle, the composer, died aged 87.

Extinction Rebellion blocked four London bridges. A replacement for the 118-year-old railway bridge over Rugby Road, Leamington Spa, was brought through Warwickshire on a 96-wheel road transporter. Rob Key, the former England batsman, was appointed as managing director of the England cricket team and will help find Joe Root's replacement as captain.

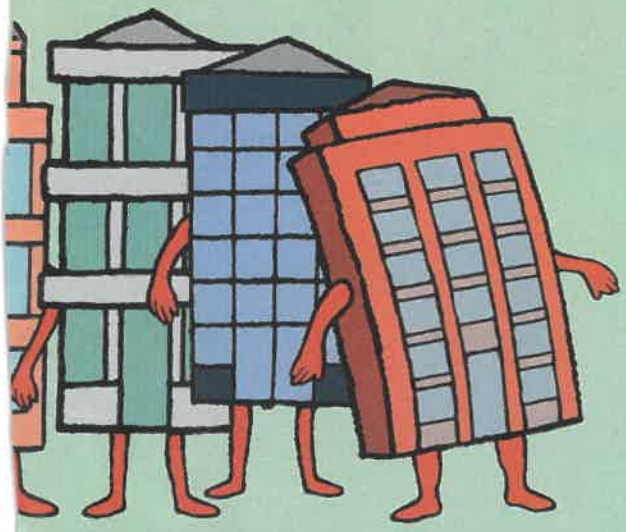
Abroad

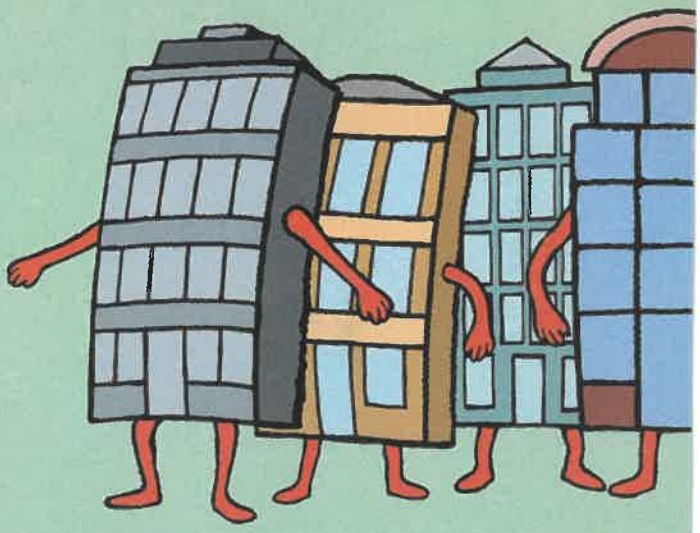
Russia struck cities across Ukraine from the air, hitting Kyiv, Lviv in the west, and Kharkiv in the east. A Russian offensive engaged Ukrainian positions along a 300-mile front. Ukrainian forces in Mariupol refused an invitation to surrender; they made a stand at the Azovstal steelworks, where hundreds of civilians were reported to have taken refuge. The 100,000 civilians left in the ruined city were forbidden by Russia from moving about. Vadym Boychenko, the mayor of Mariupol, said there had been reports of Russian mobile cremation units burning civilians' bodies to conceal war crimes. Thousands of civilians from Mariupol were reported to have been deported to Russia.

Russia's new offensives followed a statement by Igor Konashenkov, a Russian defence ministry spokesman: 'Missile strikes against objects in Kyiv will increase in response to the commission of any attacks of a terrorist nature or sabotage on Russian territory.' His words followed the sinking of the 12,490 ton guided-missile cruiser *Moskva*, the Russian Black Sea flagship. Ukraine said two of its Neptune missiles had sunk it, which American officials thought true; Russia said there had been a fire after ammunition exploded. What happened to the 510 crew members was not clear. Ukrainian police said that 900 civilian bodies had been found from the Russian occupation around Kyiv. The UN reported that five million Ukrainians had fled the country. President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine accused Germany and other countries buying Russian oil and gas of dealing in 'other people's blood'. President Vladimir Putin said on television: 'Unfriendly countries concede that they won't be able to make do without Russian energy resources.' The USA and Britain said that they would send more artillery, the Czech Republic offered to mend Ukrainian tanks, and Germany lent money to buy arms from German manufacturers.

The total in the world reported to have died with coronavirus reached 6,221,969 by the beginning of the week. In Shanghai, entering its fourth week of lockdown, three people were acknowledged to have died from Covid; officials said only 38 per cent of residents over 60 are fully vaccinated. At least 440 people died in floods in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. More than 150 Palestinians were injured in clashes with Israeli police around al-Aqsa mosque. Twenty or so police cars were set on fire in Sweden in protest against a plan by a right-wing party, Stram Kurs ('Hard Line'), to burn a copy of the Quran. The number of Netflix subscribers fell for the first time since 2011. The board of Twitter resisted a hostile takeover bid of $43 billion from Elon Musk. Sri Lanka was defaulting on its debts, according to Fitch and S&P, and thousands protested in the street at shortages of petrol and food. CSH

For our Global Select Fund, we handpick the very best of the world's Smaller Companies.





LF Montanaro Global Select Fund

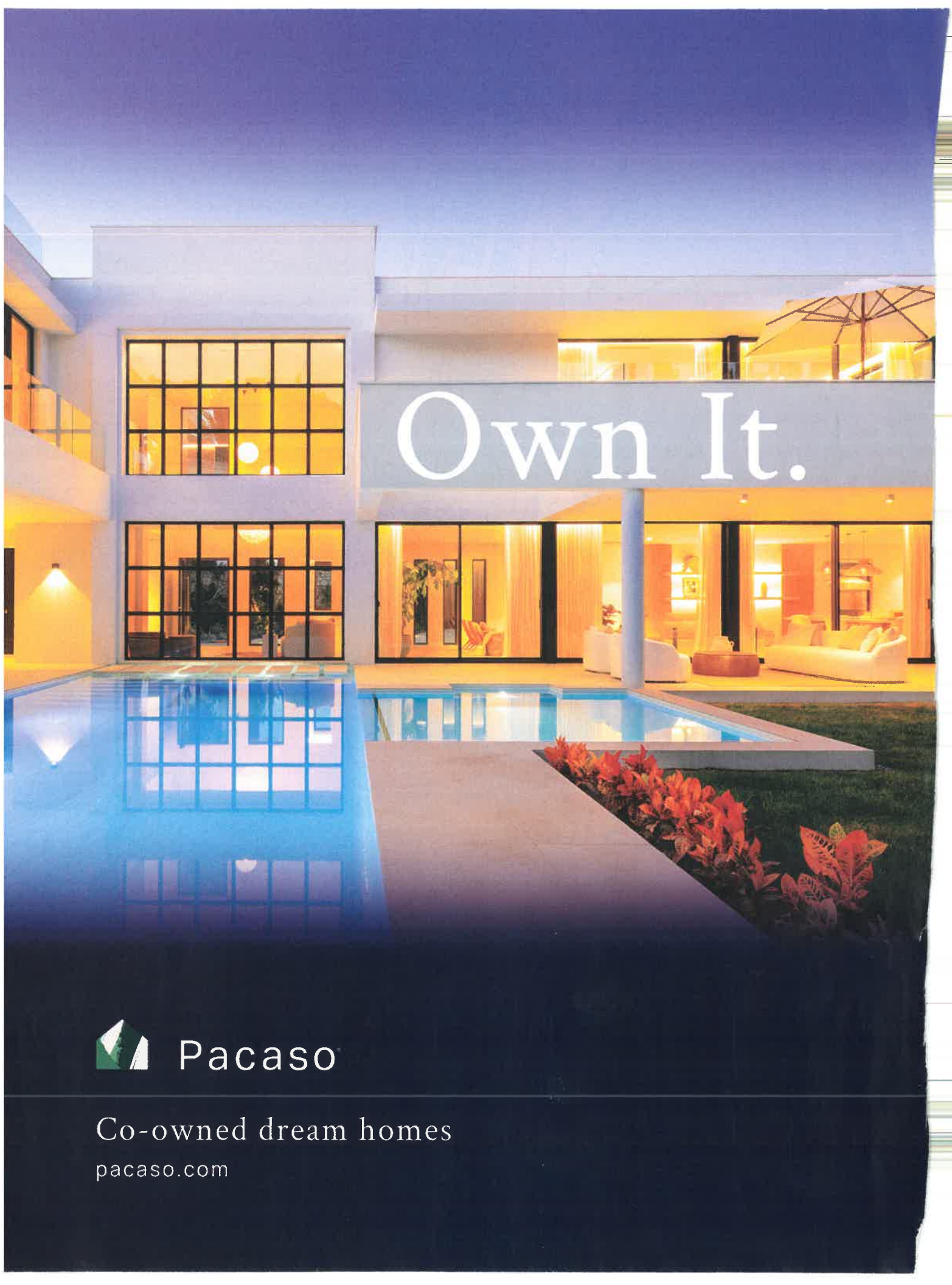
We've been investing in Smaller Companies for over 30 years. We're old hands. And we have one of the largest teams of analysts in the sector. Which means we've met a lot of firms over the decades. So when we say that we strive to choose only the very best of the world's Smaller Companies for our Global Select Fund, we say it with conviction. So much so that the fund typically contains just thirty, elite stocks. Plenty of funds describe themselves as 'Select', not many are this picky.

MONTANARO

No one knows Smaller Companies like we do

Speak to an adviser or visit montanaro.co.uk/GlobalSelect

Issued by Montanaro Asset Management Ltd, authorised and regulated in the UK by the FCA (FRN: 183211), with its registered address at 53 Threadneedle Street, London, EC2R 8AR. Capital is at risk. Past performance is not an indicator of future performance. The value of investments may go down as well as up.


Own It.
Pacaso
Co-owned dream homes
pacaso.com

DIARY

Piers Morgan

As you may have heard (if you haven't, I'm losing my narcissistically self-promotional touch) my new TV show *Piers Morgan Uncensored* launches soon and will air daily in the UK, America and Australia, thus fulfilling my long-held ambition to become a global irritant. The title provokes mirth among those who feel I've never shown any sign of being censored. But my enforced removal from *Good Morning Britain* last year for refusing to apologise for an honest opinion that Meghan Markle is to veracity what Vladimir Putin is to humanity was cowardly corporate censorship, and I'm confident that if Princess Pinocchio writes to my new boss Rupert Murdoch demanding my head on a plate – as she did to ITV's CEO Dame Carolyn McCall – she won't be quite so successful.

My brilliant team are working feverishly to land big-name guests (the first show's an eye-popping corker…) and getting some amusing responses. Fiery filmmaker Oliver Stone emailed back: 'Piers, I look forward to your new show and congratulate you on the way you keep managing to make a better bed for yourself each time you get fired. Best, Oliver.'

Newspaper adverts for *PMU* have included snarling images of me crunching the Houses of Parliament like King Kong, suggesting the honourable members will be recoiling in terror from my comeback. In fact, the opposite may be true. Several months ago, Michael Gove and Oliver Dowden – both of whom I've aggressively harangued on air – invited me to a secret senior Tory away-day conference to berate them all about where they're going wrong. 'Just be your usual charming self, Piers,' urged Gove: 'as blunt and rude as you like.' 'Admit it, Michael,' I replied. 'You guys just miss me shouting at you.' There was no denial. Sadly I couldn't go, but if any ministers are craving a savage personal critique, the Housing Secretary has my number.

Someone who urgently needs one is Rishi Sunak. Until this month, I'd have bet on him being the next PM.

He seemed an oasis of calm professional intelligence amid a miserably mediocre cabinet. But you never know the real mettle of a politician until they get roasted by scandal or crisis, and Sunak's melted under fire over his family's finances and recent budget. A keen cricket lover, he told me at Lord's last summer that he's a 'firmly off-the-front-foot' batsman. But the way he's been over-defensively prodding, nibbling, ducking and playing-and-missing as the bouncers fly in would put even England's woeful top order to shame. If you still want the top job, Chancellor – and I predict there will soon be a vacancy as partygate and surging inflation combine to bury beleaguered Boris – then stop bleating about how unfair all the perfectly legitimate media scrutiny is and get back on that firm front foot. You can't help your charming wife being stinking rich, but you can help being weak and whiny.

One cricketer always on the front foot, on and off the pitch, was my late great mate Shane Warne. Shortly before he died, we had an animated text debate about the relative merits of yeast spreads after I posted an Instagram photo of a pot of Vegemite during a trip to Australia with the caption: 'Sorry Marmite, please forgive my infidelity.'

'It's better and you know it!' Shane messaged. 'Vegemite doesn't stick to your teeth like Marmite.' Poignantly, his last meal was Vegemite on toast.

Shane was a fantastically entertaining character with a life mantra I've adopted for my new show. 'Sometimes,' he said, 'just say "get stuffed" to the fun police.'

Last summer I caught the delta variant at the Euros final. (When I told my wife Celia that I was going to Wembley with 80,000 sweating, shrieking fans because 'Football's coming home!' she replied with remarkable prescience: 'I suspect coronavirus is coming home instead.') Afterwards, I developed very dreary long Covid for eight months. This manifested itself in no taste or smell, disconcerting brain fog and constant energy-ravaging fatigue.

But then a strange thing happened: I embarked on a crazy six-week global *PMU* promotional tour which took me from London to New York, LA, Florida, Honolulu, Sydney, Dubai, London, New York, LA, Florida, London – and rather than it finishing me off, it finished off the long Covid and I feel back to normal. My doctors are as bemused as I'm relieved.

Piers Morgan Uncensored *launches on Monday 25 April on TalkTV.*

THE SPECTATOR

Introductory offer

Subscribe for only £1 an issue

✓ Weekly delivery of the magazine
✓ App access to the new issue from Thursday
✓ Full website access

spectator.co.uk/intro
0330 333 0050 quoting A817A

Auto-renewing payments only. $1 a week in Australia call 089 362 4134 quoting T125A or go to spectator.com.au/intro

Reasons not to be cheerful

Mid-term unpopularity is a given in British politics. Veterans from the Thatcher era like to joke that a government that isn't behind at the halfway point of its term isn't doing its job properly. But the worry for the Tories is that their current unpopularity is different.

The usual explanation for the mid-term blues is that a prime minister seeks to get the politically difficult stuff out of the way as soon as possible after an election victory. The government loses support initially before – if everything goes to plan – reaping the rewards of its tough decisions in time for the next general election. Straight after the Tories came into office in 2010, George Osborne hiked taxes and cut spending in his Budget. In 2012, he was booed at the Olympic Stadium and the Tories were consistently behind in the polls. But by 2015, real incomes were going up and the Tories won a surprise majority.

Nevertheless, because of Covid and the Johnson government's lack of a clear governing prospectus, the Tories are not following the usual arc of the parliament. Rather than raising taxes right at the beginning, they have only just this month increased National Insurance. The last spending settlement, which included increases for all departments, is going to become less generous as this parliament goes on – and polling day nears – because of inflation.

Rishi Sunak's announcement in the spring statement of a cut in income tax for 2024, just before the likely date of the next general election, is an attempt to make people feel a bit better off before polling day. But it remains to be seen whether the cut will have been in place long enough for people to really feel it before the campaign gets under way.

It is not just on fiscal matters that the government has strayed from the usual rhythm. Covid has effectively lopped a year of political time off the government's term. The pandemic meant that plans to reform the UK's unpredictable and sclerotic planning system were not introduced until after Johnson had already expended a considerable amount of political capital. In the end, No. 10, spooked by the prospect of a backbench revolt, dropped the idea. The remnants of planning reform will now be included in the coming levelling-up bill. But these limited changes are unlikely to make a significant economic difference.

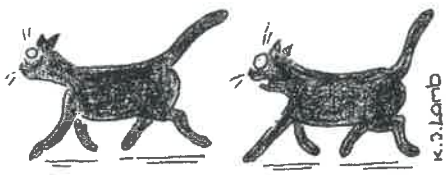
The pandemic also caused a whole slew of backlogs that will take much of the rest of this parliament to fix. The most worrying of these for the government is the NHS: 6.2 million people are now on waiting lists in England, and that number continues to rise. The number of people waiting more than 12 hours in accident and emergency is the highest it has been since such records began in August 2010.

In the near term, it is hard to see where political relief will come from for the government. The Tories are already behind in the polls, even before the coming months which will see household incomes squeezed by rising prices. Then there will be a series of contentious public sector pay settlements,

There is beginning to be a certain fatalism in Tory circles about how difficult the coming years will be

with the government keen to keep increases below inflation to avoid setting off a wage price spiral. To round it all off, there will be the problems that come from partygate, which Katy Balls writes about on page 12. Downing Street might be more politically aware now than it was when Dan Rosenfield, a former civil servant, was chief of staff, but one well-informed source warns that there is still 'quite a lot of internal clashing going on' in the building.

The International Monetary Fund now forecasts that the UK economy will grow by a mere 1.2 per cent next year and there is beginning to be a certain fatalism in Tory circles about how difficult the coming years will be. A cabinet minister and a pair of senior backbenchers have separately confided to me in the past week that they think the party might need to spend some time in opposition to map out a new agenda. When politicians start thinking like that, it can quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy.



'Boris Johnson's got more lives than we have.'

Set against this, though, is the fact that nearly every western country is experiencing similar economic challenges at the moment. The government will be able to point to external factors – Covid, Putin's invasion of Ukraine, supply chain disruption caused by Chinese lockdowns – as reasons for the challenges people are facing. There are also reasons to think that the economy might turn around in time for a 2024 election; with the oil price this high, more and more US shale will become available which will, in time, bring down energy prices.

Downing Street is also moving to deal with some of its other political vulnerabilities. Its Rwanda plan is designed to show Tory and Leave voters – who regard immigration as one of the three most important issues facing the country – that it is taking the small boats issue seriously. There will almost inevitably be legal challenges to the policy, but there are those in government who think that being defeated in court would merely underline to their supporters their determination to deal with the issue in much the way that the prorogation judgment did with Brexit. As one secretary of state observes: 'Boris has learned his lessons well from the whole Brexit period.'

Then there is also the fact that Keir Starmer and Labour have far from sealed the deal with the electorate. Starmer has dealt with many of the party's weaknesses. His approach to the Ukraine crisis shows how different he is on national security from Jeremy Corbyn and his blame-the-West-first approach, but it would be a struggle to say what his Labour party actually stands for.

In electoral terms, however, this might not matter much if the Tories continue to make mistakes. In British politics, governments tend to lose elections more than oppositions win them. But if the Tories can stop the next election from turning into a referendum on their record, then the absence of a compelling proposition from Labour will matter more.

Boris Johnson is happiest being an optimist. He likes to be the politician who declares that everything is getting better. That is going to be extremely difficult for him over the coming months. He faces a long hard summer.

SPECTATOR.CO.UK/SHOTS
Hear daily political analysis from James Forsyth, Katy Balls, Fraser Nelson and more.

THE SPECTATOR'S NOTES

Charles Moore

My friend, the novelist Alan Judd, emails with the right quotation for those who argue that Putin should be given an 'off-ramp'. It is from *Henry V*: 'How can they charitably dispose of any thing when blood is their argument?' It really is Putin's argument. I have been studying an astonishing piece from RIA Novosti, the official Russian news agency, earlier this month, called 'What Russia should do with Ukraine'. Barbarously written (or possibly barbarously translated), and barbarous in thought, it is about the need to extirpate every 'Nazi – read Ukrainian –'. The Ukrainians have for years supported 'total terror' in 'Odessa, Kharkov, Dnepropetrovsk, Mariupol, and other Russian cities', apparently, and so there must be 'a set of measures in relation to the Nazified population mass, which technically cannot be subjected to direct punishment as war criminals': 'All of them are equally involved in extreme cruelty against the civilian population, equally guilty of the genocide of the Russian people, do not comply with the laws and customs of war. War criminals and active Nazis should be exemplarily and exponentially punished.' There must be 're-education' through 'ideological repression'.

It is quite inadequate, the article goes on, for Ukraine to become a neutral state between East and West, so anything called 'Ukraine' must go. 'The collective West itself is the designer, source and sponsor of Ukrainian Nazism… Ukronazism carries not less, but a greater threat to the world and Russia than German Nazism of the Hitlerite version.' All 'armed Nazi formations' will be 'liquidated'. The nationalist elites must be 'eliminated' and the 'social "mud"' beneath them must atone for their guilt. Russia will 'act as the guardian of the Nuremburg trials'. Russia was so patient but was rejected. It 'did everything possible to save the West in the 20th century… The last act of Russian altruism was the outstretched hand of friendship from Russia, for which Russia received a monstrous blow in the 1990s'. So, 'Russia will go its own way, not worrying about the fate of the West, relying on another part of its heritage – leadership in the global process of decolonisation'. Ukraine itself will be decolonised by Russia, 'which the population of Ukraine will have to understand as it begins to free itself from the intoxication, temptation and dependence of the so-called European choice'. Reading this, you can see why Ukrainians, as they confront the new Russian assault, cannot believe in any deal. They are being told they have no right to exist.

Attitudes to Russia bring out the mysteriousness, to a British way of thinking, of French political attitudes. Although the invasion of Ukraine has made the presidential candidates back off a bit, all the main ones – Macron, Le Pen, Éric Zemmour and even the leftist firebrand Jean-Luc Mélenchon – have tended to be pretty nice to the Russian leader over the years. They have made the sort of sympathetic noises towards him that in Britain one hears only from Jeremy Corbyn and elements of old Ukip. Why might there be French votes, left, right and centre, in Putinism? Apart from the embarrassing fact that Putin seems to have bought up some on the French right, there seems also to be some romantic idea, going back more than 200 years, that France and Russia have a spiritual bond incomprehensible to brutish Teutons and unimaginative Anglo-Saxon shopkeepers. Related to this is the belief that only the French have the civilisational depth and subtlety to ensure European peace. That is why President Macron has frequently spent more than an hour on the phone to his counterpart in the Kremlin. So far the benefit to European civilisation has not been discernible. But whether Macron or Le Pen wins on Sunday, this strange *tendresse* will persist.

In the *Guardian* last week, Sonita Alleyne, Master of Jesus College, Cambridge, sought to continue the argument about the court case which her college had brought of its own free will and had lost. She did so even though the college has decided not to appeal. On 23 March, Judge David Hodge ruled that the college could not remove the listed memorial to its 17th-century benefactor Tobias Rustat, who had links with the slave trade. The Master wrote that: 'The presence of the memorial is deeply offensive to many in the college community. Teaching them more about Rustat's benevolence, as the consistory court judgment suggests, will not bring them back into the chapel. Rustat's personal generosity pales against the mass rapes, torture and murders that occurred as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. An increasing number of students refuse to enter the chapel to pray, reflect, hear our wonderful choir, or take part in social and cultural events due to the presence of the memorial.' If she is right about that, it will be largely due to the college council's determination to rubbish the judgment. Besides, how does she know about this 'increasing number of students'? The college has been on vacation since before the judgment and returns only this week. She is putting herself and, indeed, the Dean of Chapel, in a strange position by effectively telling undergraduates to boycott her own institution's place of worship. Looking at the chapel programme for the coming term, I see that, on 17 May, it will hold a 'Vigil for the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia (IDAHOBiT) followed by port and cocoa'. Will it be colluding with racism and colonialism to attend this event?

Most politicians tend to say it when they can't think of anything else to say. Sir Keir Starmer says it almost every time he opens his mouth. 'The British people deserve better,' he declares. Do we? Why? His implication is that if we vote for him, we will get what we deserve. Perhaps he is right.

Boris fights on

Will he survive?

KATY BALLS

On Tuesday night, after apologising again to the House of Commons for breaking lockdown rules, Boris Johnson addressed a private meeting of Tory MPs. He had a message for his critics: 'This is the beginning of the end.' 'For a minute, I thought he was talking about himself,' says one MP. In fact, the Prime Minister was referring to his belief that the biggest political scandal of his premiership is reaching its finale – one in which he comes out on top.

Some of the MPs in attendance struggled to see much to be optimistic about. Johnson subjected the country to draconian lockdown rules which the police have found he did not observe, making him the first prime minister in history to admit to breaking the law while in office. He had promised the House of Commons that he had not broken any rules, so now the opposition parties are plotting ways to maximise pain for the Tories over whether he knowingly misled the house: a resigning offence. Labour enjoys a consistent poll lead – and is even ahead as the party of low taxation. One forecast projects a loss of 800 Conservative council seats in next month's local elections.

And yet, despite all this, things are not as bad for Johnson as they were three months ago, when MPs were on the brink of reaching 54 letters of no confidence and triggering a vote on his leadership. In recent weeks, more MPs have retracted their calls for him to go – including the Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross. 'I think Boris has got away with it,' says a former minister. 'The most likely scenario now is that he leads us into the next election. But what happens then, no one knows.'

The Tories are about seven points behind in the polls, but David Cameron and John Major would have killed for such a narrow gap at the same time in their premierships. Even a loss of 800 council seats would be mild compared to the 1,300 seats lost under Theresa May in May 2019. 'Expectations are drilled so far into the dirt, people won't be surprised if we get hammered,' says one senior government figure.

'If this is the Prime Minister at his lowest, think how it will be once we have moved past this,' argues one Johnson loyalist. The Prime Minister's supporters are confident they can turn the current situation around, even if a recent poll found that the word most associated with Johnson was 'liar'. He has a new inner circle: chief of staff Steve Barclay, head of policy Andrew Griffith, deputy chief of staff David Canzini (an ally of Lynton Crosby), comms chief Guto Harri, permanent secretary Samantha Jones (a former volunteer with the Israeli army), and Samantha Cohen, previously a royal aide. They are focused on repairing ties with the parliamentary party and making the No. 10 operation less managerial.

The main aim is to stop backbench rebellions over policies designed to please the right of the party

Their aim is to stop backbench rebellions over policies that are designed to please the right of the party. The plan to process refugees in Rwanda has caused uproar among One Nation Tories, but polls show that it's popular with the public. The government is also battling the civil service, in the form of a crackdown on Whitehall's work-from-home culture (which James Heale writes about on page 22), and plans to privatise Channel 4, which is seen by some as the Tories taking revenge for too much left-wing analysis.

These policies have not allowed the Conservatives to take the lead over Labour, but it does all come pretty close to the right-wing agenda that any plausible challenger to Johnson would offer. This is perhaps the biggest reason for his survival: it's a lot harder to imagine who a successor to Johnson could be after the sudden implosion of Rishi Sunak. The Chancellor is reeling from a mini-Budget that misfired (his tax rises worsening the cost-of-living crisis), his angry reaction to questions about his wife's non-dom tax status, and the news that he held a US green card while in No. 11.

For two years, the Chancellor was hugely popular and Labour found him a difficult opponent to attack. Now his enemies have a narrative they plan to push: that he stands exposed as a member of the out-of-touch global elite whose Green Card and wife's non-dom status suggest he'd jet back off to Santa Monica in a heartbeat. Following a long stint as the bookies' favourite to succeed Johnson, a poll this week shows Sunak doesn't make it into the top five, trumped by 'A Conservative MP' and 'Don't know'. 'The biggest factor helping Boris is that Rishi also has a fine,' says a member of government. 'Rishi has shown himself to be politically naive while Boris has been getting his act together,' says one member of the 2019 intake.

If Sunak is not in the running, any immediate leadership contest starts to look unpredictable and unappealing, particularly as other previous 'safe bet' candidates now seem no less risky. 'Sajid can't run after admitting to being a non-dom in the past,' says one senior Tory. Other super-wealthy Tory MPs – such as the Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi – are now seen with suspicion. 'We're in a cost-of-living crisis – everything is more complicated,' explains a minister.

Ben Wallace, the defence secretary, is the new favourite among Tory MPs, thanks

to his handling of the Ukraine crisis. He is credited for persuading the Prime Minister to send defensive weaponry to Ukraine ahead of Russia's invasion, against opposition from his own department and Whitehall generally. But when it comes to the scrutiny a leadership candidate would face, he is untested.

The other frontrunner is Liz Truss. Her admirers in the party point out that the non-dom crisis isn't bad for the Foreign Secretary. 'It turns out there are upsides to being one of the poorest members of cabinet,' says a party figure, suggesting Truss has little in the way of financial skeletons in her closet. But there are enough MPs in the parliamentary party who take an 'anyone but Truss' position to make her path to power difficult.

For now, it seems likely that Tory MPs will stick with Johnson for the same reason they kept Theresa May for so long: they can't agree on who should follow. 'For the first time it is dawning on many colleagues that there's a real chance the Tories will lose the next election,' says a senior party figure. 'A majority of 80 does not guarantee another win – and Labour don't need a majority to govern.' The polling that is of particular concern for Tory strategists is that on the economy the Conservative lead over Labour has collapsed. As of this month, YouGov finds that the parties draw on the issue. Labour is now seen as more likely to keep taxes low.

'For the first time it is dawning on many colleagues there's a real chance the Tories will lose the next election'

Johnson could exert his power after a bad local election result by calling a cabinet reshuffle and moving his wounded Chancellor. But this would present two problems. There's no easy solution for a cost-of-living crisis, and a new chancellor more likely to assuage No. 10's borrow-and-spend instincts could spook the Bank of England.

Plus, a weakened Sunak may be exactly what Johnson needs. 'Boris is the ultimate pro-competition laissez-faire politician until it comes to himself,' says a former minister. 'He wants those around him not to pose a threat. It suits him to have a vassal chancellor.' One party old hand believes the person who would benefit most from a change of chancellor would be Sunak: 'He needs to get to another department and regroup – but not the Home Office.'

When David Canzini took over as Johnson's new deputy chief of staff in March, he said the government's main priority was delivering Brexit opportunities. That has already changed – now the cost-of-living crisis tops the list. Johnson thinks he can win back Tory doubters by handling all of this in a Conservative way. He has been talking about a plan for growth from investment and skills to free ports.

He will attempt to seize the initiative next week by chairing a meeting with secretaries of state where each will be asked to come up with a way to ease the cost-of-living crisis. 'It shouldn't just be all on Rishi to hand out dough,' says a senior government figure. Measures under review include raising the cap for the maximum number of children a childminder can look after – which currently stands at six children under the age of eight. 'Jacob looks after six and he's not even a professional,' says a party figure (though Rees-Mogg has admitted on the record that he has never changed a nappy).

The best-case scenario touted by Johnson optimists is that after a long shaky start, he has now found his feet and will govern as he did in his City Hall days: as a liberal Tory keeping council tax down while launching *grands projets*. 'He had to focus first on pushing Brexit through,' says a confidante of the Prime Minister. 'Then the pandemic came and he was "following the science" and doing deeply illiberal things. At last he has a chance to do what he does best – what his instincts are.' A focus on a conservative agenda – one which pleases the right of his party – is also viewed as the Tories' route to a fifth term.

Johnson's handling of Britain's response to the war in Ukraine has also boosted his standing among Tory members. The official line – as parroted by loyal Tory MPs both in the Chamber and in the media – is that a European war means there's no time for a lengthy leadership contest. As Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, a senior Tory backbencher, put it: 'The process of electing a new prime minister will take at least two months. With all that instability that it will cause, I think it is right to wait until the investigation is concluded before making a judgment.'

But things can always get worse. 'There are worse challenges coming,' warns a Tory grandee. The biggest concern among Tory MPs is that the police investigation will bring more fines for the Prime Minister. 'He has been fined over a birthday cake in working hours – that's the thin end of the wedge,' says a government aide. If Johnson is found guilty of many more lockdown offences – including in the Downing Street flat – then his party could still turn on him. He's being saved not by personal loyalty, but by a feeling on the Tory backbenches that he's better than any likely alternative. This calculation could change at any moment.

The Prime Minister has survived longer into the partygate scandal than his critics predicted. But he is still in a volatile position. For all his talk of the beginning of the end, Johnson has some way to go yet before he is safe.

TOUGH CHOICES

'Merlot? Chardonnay? Rioja? Pinot Grigio?'

Homes Under the Hammer

When I get there, my friend is fast asleep
with nail clippings scattered on his knee
in the dayroom's baffled light. I wake him gently.
'I don't know where I am.' 'You've been asleep.'

Homes Under the Hammer is on the BBC.
We manage, once we find his stick, a turn
around the block. He mithers about his hat,
all shifting sand, in peril on the sea.

I take his arm, point out cherry blossom
(petals on a black taxi) as if spring
could blow his mind. But how can he withstand

the rising sea: the broken home, his darling
pottery collection auctioned off to no one
he could know, lovers lost with all hands?

—*Maitreyabandhu*

Energy savings

How I finally learned to love my eco-home

EMILY HILL

Nine years ago, when I invested everything I had in a part-rent, part-buy, one-bedroom, government-backed eco-home which proved to be a boiling box in summer, my first instinct was to throw myself out of a window – but I couldn't because they opened only ten centimetres. My second was to complain about it in *The Spectator*. Now, I return to update you on my energy bills. Prepare to turn green with envy.

Friends who live successful sorts of lives – involving houses, spouses and gardens – exclaim 'Oh, so you weren't joking about living in a J.G. Ballard novel?' when they come around for the book launches I host in my living room, before asking if I can open a window. 'I can actually,' I boast. 'The restrictors were removed on humanitarian grounds and a man in the block next door fell out and died last year in circumstances still unreported in any newspaper.'

But last night, I asked a WhatsApp group of these friends how rising electricity bills were working out for them. 'They wanted to put our monthly payment up to £920 – which would have been £11,000 a year,' complained one, who lives in a cottage. 'They've agreed to take £720.' Someone else found hers had gone up by £6,500 a year and intends to sleep in a tent in the garden this summer, while another said he'd concluded his was a misprint comparable only with his latest tax bill.

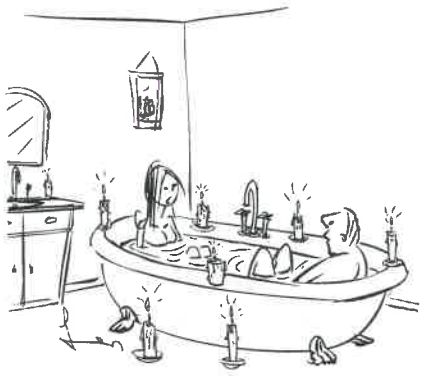
As for elderly people on fixed incomes, the situation makes anyone with an ounce of compassion feel unwell. In January, the *Daily Mirror* reported that a 98-year-old D-Day veteran was living on a pension of £220 a week and spending £134 a month on electricity – even though he was careful to boil just enough water for one cup of tea and was only putting his immersion heating on every other day.

So when I reviewed my latest electricity costs from GEUK, I felt very grateful to my eco-home: last year the bill totalled £475.63 for the entire year. In February, I received a note from the company's CEO advising that this figure would shoot up by some £300 from this month. In normal circumstances, such a price increase for exactly the same product would send you shopping around for alternatives, but in Poundland everything I want to buy now costs £2, so thank heavens for insulation.

'Our pricing is not reflective of the fourfold increase in wholesale gas prices the market has experienced,' GEUK's Doug Stewart explained in his letter. 'We are still the only supplier supplying 100 per cent green gas, which means it will be exempt from the green gas levy.' Customers cannot expect prices to go down again no matter how green the gas gets, though – because we are 'not experiencing a spike, but a sustained rise in energy prices'. This was before the war in Ukraine began and Putin started charging in roubles – the ramifications of which are likely to kill more pensioners in the coming winters than Covid ever did.

In Poundland everything I want to buy now costs £2, so thank heavens for insulation

Some eco-home owners are not as lucky as me. Those who bought properties from which the cladding had to be stripped, because post-Grenfell it was revealed as a threat to their lives, now find that the temperature indoors has dropped drastically. In January, the *Guardian* exposed the plight of 500,000 people in the 17,000 apartment blocks across the UK which rely on communal heating and hot water systems, whose properties are not protected by the government's energy price cap. 'One owner of a two-bedroom flat saw bills rise from £80 in November to £260 for December,' the paper noted. 'Others have received even higher bills, as the unit gas price has tripled, alongside rising electricity charges.'



'Remember when we did this to be romantic rather than to save on hot water and electricity?'

Extinction Rebellion, obviously, doesn't think such costs are enough of a deterrent and is intent on driving them up further by blocking tankers full of anything – including cooking oil – from reaching us. But what I find saddest about this permanent rise in energy costs that will bankrupt pensioners and ruin the prospects of young families is that so many of us were using the bare minimum anyway.

Anyone who has a father who read Evelyn Waugh novels for parenting guidance will have been raised, like me, in a culture of lukewarm baths used by two previous occupants. The thermostat in our draughty house was positioned right next to the hearth so the heating went off if it was cold enough to light a fire. Shaun Hill is 64 years old and his carbon footprint makes Greta Thunberg look like a petrolhead – he's never once flown on an aeroplane and his idea of 'going abroad' consisted of a single trip to Ireland. It's these sorts of people that the eco-zealots want to punish further. My dad's heating oil bill has shot up to £949 and the electricity to £1,337 – which is just above the new national average. If Boris Johnson continues to insist on wasting heinous amounts of money on his mission to turn our green and pleasant land into the 'Saudi Arabia of wind', the 'Qatar of hydrogen' or whatever despotic regime he seeks to emulate this week, it's going to get even more expensive.

So is abandoning country life and downsizing to a part-rent, part-buy eco-home in a modern metropolis the solution to rising energy bills? Probably – but I wouldn't recommend it. When footage of the Chinese authorities killing the dogs of people who tested positive for coronavirus in their latest lockdown emerged, my second impulse – after horror – was to wonder: 'The CCP lets them keep dogs?' In London lockdown, I was sent constant reminders that I am not allowed any sort of dog in my home – even for emotional-support reasons. Only the very rich can look on rising energy costs and feel anything but dread – and none of them, of course, live in an eco-home with one bedroom.

In good hands.

DIVERSIFY YOUR PORTFOLIO WITH LONDON'S FIRST-CLASS PRECIOUS METALS PARTNER

Founded in 1778, Sharps Pixley understand the true value of gold – peace of mind for wealth preservation; a safe-haven during market turmoil; a tax-efficient investment without size constraints or counter-party risk; a liquid asset that you can hold in your hands. We get to know our clients as well as we know the markets, providing an exceptional level of service that is discreet and bespoke to meet every investment need.

DISCOVER THE POTENTIAL OF GOLD

VISIT OUR LONDON SHOWROOM
AT 54 ST JAMES'S STREET
OR WWW.SHARPSPIXLEY.COM

WE ACCEPT CRYPTOCURRENCIES

LONDON'S PRECIOUS METAL PARTNER

FLAGSHIP LONDON SHOWROOM | BESPOKE INVESTMENT SERVICES
SECURE VAULT & SAFE DEPOSIT BOXES | STATE-OF-THE-ART SECURITY
ALLOCATED AND SEGREGATED STORAGE | GOLD, SILVER, PALLADIUM

SHARPS PIXLEY LTD BULLION BROKERS LONDON
SHARPS PIXLEY

LBMA MEMBER

Degussa GOLD AND SILVER.

PART OF THE DEGUSSA GROUP: ZURICH | GENEVA | FRANKFURT | MADRID | LONDON

The narcissist vs the fantasist

France faces a gruesome choice

JONATHAN MILLER

Something strange is happening in advanced western democracies. In America and France, voters keep finding themselves choosing between candidates for whom they have very little affection. In America, we saw Clinton vs Trump, followed by Biden vs Trump. And in France this week, we have Macron vs Le Pen again. As many French voters now say, this is a choice between *la peste* (plague) et *le choléra*.

Emmanuel Macron is disliked: arrogant and narcissistic to the point where he has compared himself to Jupiter, king of the gods. He has spent five years insulting and patronising voters and delivering mediocre results. His management of the epidemic was repressive and absurdist. He failed in Africa, failed with Putin, threw tantrums over Australia and Brexit.

Marine Le Pen is equally gruesome. She breeds exquisite Bengal cats while offering France an incoherent nationalism and an economic policy essentially indistinguishable from that of Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the French version of Jeremy Corbyn.

Macron is evidently smarter, Le Pen more human – although you wouldn't want either to dinner (maybe lunch). Macron is the candidate of the media, the bankers, most of the six million fonctionnaires, the parasitals. He has only an ephemeral political movement. En Marche resembles a private start-up more than a political party. He remains young-looking and is certainly energetic but voters aged between 25 and 34 much prefer Le Pen.

Yet Le Pen is hardly a popular populist. She has twice failed in her presidential ambitions, and is equally odd as a representative of the *sans dents* (without teeth), as working-class France was contemptuously described by the former socialist president François Hollande. Her political movement, the Rassemblement National (née National Front) is a family affair, the creation of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose own views can legitimately be described as of the extreme right, and who himself tried five times for the presidency. It's a family business, a clan. Marine contests the election by inheritance.

She has had some success focusing on cost-of-living issues, the most pressing concern in so many countries. But she speaks to a France that has all but disappeared, a nostalgic fantasy in which men wear berets, everyone carries a baguette and the number one car on the road is the Citroën 2CV.

With Macron, you get the 'seducer' as his father calls him, who married his high-school drama teacher and became a technocrat wannabe ruler of Europe. He's terribly fond of doing photoshoots. He knows he is smarter than everybody. He loves the sound of his own voice.

When Macron is (probably) elected, none of the country's conflicts will look closer to being resolved

Macron, whom everybody expects to win on Sunday, offers only more Macron, which means policy defined by whatever is attracting the president's egotistical and butterfly-like mind. He'll say anything day to day, as he persuades himself, possibly not unreasonably, that he is outwitting everyone. His ruling objective is imperious and inflexible. Macron also seeks the leadership of Europe. He should be careful what he wishes for, because the Europe he imagines is no less of a fantasy than the France imagined by Le Pen.

For her part, she offers more change than the conservative French are likely to be ready for. Her programme of nationalisation, tax increases on the wealthy, an even more Russia-friendly foreign policy than that offered so far by her rival, as well as a more hostile environment for immigrants, is unsettling. She denies that she seeks 'Frexit', France's withdrawal from the European Union, but her promise to make French law supreme to European law amounts to the same thing. She has no credible likelihood of establishing even a coalition government. The media will attack her relentlessly.

Éric Zemmour needs to be mentioned because *The Spectator* paid considerable attention to him early in the campaign. Zemmour had many problems, some of his own making. His journalistic talent for controversy left open goals for his critics. He was too incendiary. His focus on immigration and Islam overshadowed the often sensible things he had to say about education and security. He ignored his team's appeals to address inflation concerns. He was attacked and dismissed as an extremist by much of the media, from *Le Monde* to the *New York Times* and the commentariat of London. He was, in the end, the wrong sort of disruptor. He told his voters to back Le Pen to stop more Macron, but they aren't all willing to listen to him.

So it's democracy by paralysis. When Macron is (probably) elected president on Sunday night for a second five-year term, none of the country's fundamental conflicts will look closer to being resolved. Abstention rates will be higher. Macron will win with a much smaller majority than the 66 per cent to 34 per cent he achieved in the second round in 2017. He will lack any popular mandate. He will win the election only because voters are even more distrustful of Le Pen. She can go back to her cats. France will keep going to the dogs.

ROD LIDDLE

My phone call with God

Got slightly wrecked over the bank holiday weekend and had hoped to kind of glide through the early part of the week without too much requirement for that bane of the columnist, research – looking stuff up, talking to people, etc. But I crawled downstairs on Tuesday, switched on the laptop and there was a message bearing the address s.fidelis@almighty.com: 'Hey Rod, I might have something for you. Give me a call x.'

I hadn't heard from Semp for three or four years, when he was a canny and ambitious junior press officer, helpful, disinclined to panic, never obsequious. Slightly grating Cardiff accent but other than that, a good sort. Now it seemed he was actually 'Director of Communications'. For God. Now, if you're going to be in PR, that's the job to have, no? I rang the number and after the usual how-you-keeping stuff he got to the point.

'Wondered if you'd like an exclusive interview with someone on a somewhat higher cloud than me. If you've got the time, obvs.' A higher cloud? Who did he mean? Peter? Mike? Gabriel? 'Higher still, higher still…' Really? This could mean only one thing.

'God Almighty!' I exclaimed.

'Well, indeed. He will call you at 3.15 this afternoon. All attributable, on the record… I'd gargle some Listerine if I were you, you're sounding rough.'

'Christ…' (I couldn't help myself. Interviews with God are rarer than hen's teeth.) 'Sorry… yes, thank you, of course, thank you, Semp. Why me?'

'Ah,' he replied. 'Ambiguity. While the message itself will be very unambiguous, the mode of its communication will leave plenty of room for mystery and doubt, which is rather our sort of thing. Half the people who read it will think you made it up, pissed. One more thing… he's very irked.'

'Angry?'

'Absolutely tamping, mate. Be prepared.'

I was a bag of nerves the rest of the morning. Took a shower to brighten myself up a bit, gargled, read a few verses from Genesis, tried to get myself in the zone. At 3.23 p.m. the phone rang and some babe called Jophiel said she had the Lord God Almighty, Jehovah, ready to talk to me. I stammered my thanks and when God was put through, said inanely: 'Good afternoon, sir. I hope you are well.'

'Still omnipotent,' came the reply. 'Which is the only real point of this business.' His voice was patrician upper-middle-class English, not at all booming. He sounded like Anthony Eden when he still had a quiet dignity and authority about him, before Suez.

'This… clown, Welby.'

Ah. Yes. I had rather hoped this might be the reason for the call. A tirade followed.

'As if I do not have enough on my plate with that simpering, genuflecting, Argentinian idiot in Italy and those quasi-fascist Orthodox nutjobs. So I shall be brief, for I have much to do. First, Welby's Easter sermon suggested – indeed as good as stated – that the two of us must have been in communication regarding the British government's plan to process illegal economic migrants in Rwanda. He said such a plan cannot "stand the judgment of God". As if he had been told what that judgment was. To be absolutely clear, I have had no communication with Justin Welby whatsoever, so his statement is grossly presumptuous. He has no more idea what my judgment might be than do you, or Vladimir Putin, or the popular and attractive artiste Rihanna. He is exceeding his pay grade. He is cloaking himself in an authority he does not have. He is making things up.'

It seemed Semp was 'Director of Communications'. For God. If you're going to be in PR, that's the job, no?

'Are you saying, sir, that you did not communicate perhaps covertly with him, via the medium of prayer?'

'Don't be so bloody stupid. If I had done that it would have been epiphanous and he would have known it beyond question. He would have been bathed in a spectral light and felt both weight and awe. He alluded to none of that, for the good reason that it didn't happen. But that is not my main point.'

'No, um, please go on…'

'Oh, I will. Now, I have no idea whatsoever if this plan to send the migrants to be processed in Rwanda will work. My suspicion is that it will probably never get off the ground because lots of lawyers will become involved. Lawyers who – if I may put it like this – will come, upon their passing, to be surprised and disappointed at the location in which they find themselves…'

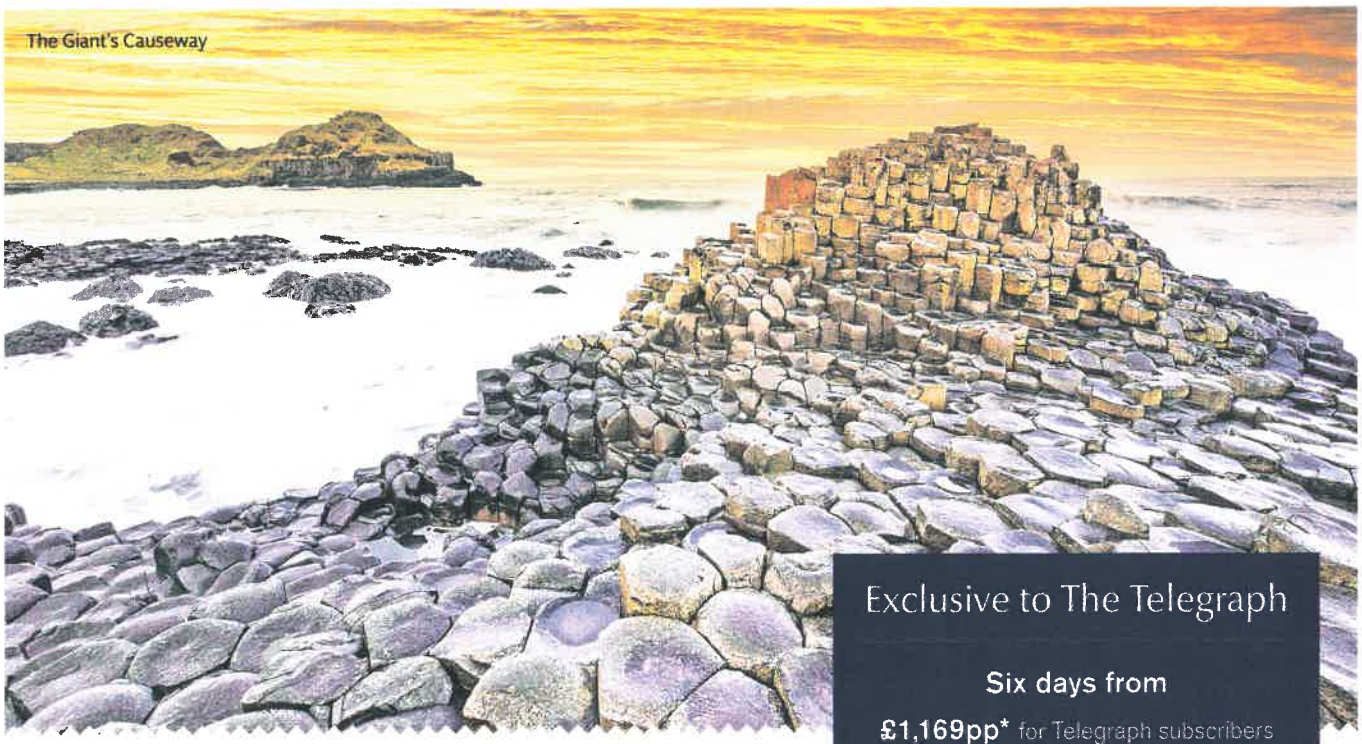
'Ha ha! Very good, sir! Can I…'

'I wasn't joking. I'm God, I don't do jokes. No, my main point is this. Welby was being weaselly and indeed cowardly. He would not address the practicalities of the whole business, preferring instead to grandstand on a generality without, as I have made clear, the authority to so do. In doing this he traduced the faith of which he is a fairly important upholder. Christianity is not about verisimilitude and seemliness – we leave that to the Zoroastrians – even if that does seem to be the entire point of the Anglican congregation. It is not about displaying one's impeccable façade of fashionable piety so as to secure the approval of an editorial meeting at HuffPost UK. It is about self-abnegation and the realisation that sometimes difficult decisions must be taken which may on the surface offend the preternaturally sensitive. It is also about alleviating suffering. Would Welby prefer that more people died crossing the Channel? Or has he not even thought about that? Christianity has always been about outcomes, not utopian illusions. Justin Welby seems to have forgotten about that. And now I must go. Contact Mr Fidelis if you have any further questions. And please give my regards to Charles Moore.'

At which point the line went dead, but the phone had a weird ethereal glow about it, as if I had inadvertently left it in the microwave. Hair of the dog, I thought, as I opened another bottle from the fridge.

TRAVEL SOLUTIONS BY TELEGRAPH MEDIA GROUP

Exclusive Tours from our trusted partner Tripsmiths


The Giant's Causeway

Exclusive to The Telegraph

Six days from

£1,169pp* for Telegraph subscribers

£1,219pp* for all other readers

Explore Northern Ireland's history

with Kate Adie

Departs October 8, 2022

Few places in the UK have experienced such tumultuous times as Northern Ireland has in the past 100 years. On this six-day trip you will learn about Northern Ireland's history and see its breathtaking natural wonders as well as hearing a private talk from the former chief news correspondent, BBC News, Kate Adie.

You'll see the site where the *Titanic* was built and launched, and follow the famous coast road through the Glens of Antrim to Ballycastle, before visiting the Unesco World Heritage Site of the Giant's Causeway.

What's included

- Five nights' four-star accommodation
- Four dinners, including three-course dinner with Kate Adie, plus BBQ dinner and traditional music night
- Tasting at Old Bushmills Distillery
- Exclusive for Telegraph subscribers: pre-dinner drinks with Kate Adie at the Europa Hotel**

About the expert

Kate Adie was the BBC's chief news correspondent between 1989 and 2003 and is the author of five books, including her autobiography, *The Kindness of Strangers*.

In partnership with

TS TOURS

telegraph.co.uk/tt-kate-adie22 Call **0204 579 1898** and quote **TST23APR22**

Terms and conditions: *Price based two sharing a room. Single supplement applies. Subject to availability. **Subscribers only. No refund or compensation will be given if Telegraph subscribers are not able to join an event. To redeem your exclusive subscriber offer visit telegraph.co.uk/rewards. Calls are made at local rates. All tours featured are operated by the partner specified. All companies are wholly independent of Telegraph Media Group Ltd. Please refer to the Data Protection Notice in today's Personal Column or telegraph.co.uk/privacypolicy. Travel insurance is not included. In the case of unforeseen circumstances, experts may be substituted. Price and itinerary correct at time of publication but may be subject to change. This trip is 100% financially protected through the Travel Trust Association (Q8549).

Conflict of opinion

Why Russian support for the war will keep growing

JADE McGLYNN

O, do the Russians long for war?
Ask of the stillness evermore,
Ask of the field, or ask the breeze,
And ask the birch and poplar trees.

So begins a famous Soviet-era song and poem, written by Yevgenii Yevtushenko during Khrushchev's Thaw. Volodymyr Zelensky cited the poem in his eve-of-war address to Russians, hoping it would rekindle these pacifistic sentiments and encourage resistance against the Kremlin's imminent invasion.

Apart from a relatively few (very) brave souls, Russians did not rise up. Opinion polls in authoritarian states must be treated carefully, but the absence of large-scale protests, combined with polls suggesting that 71 to 81 per cent of Russians approve of military activity in Ukraine, provide a fairly definitive answer to the question posed in Yevtushenko's poem: yes, the Russians do want war.

But this tragic and unappealing answer immediately raises another more nuanced question: how much do Russians want war? And at what cost?

In August last year, just six months prior to the invasion, two-thirds of Russians rated higher living standards as more important than great power status or ambitions. It gave rise to hopes that sanctions would curb Russian appetites for war, especially when combined with a mounting death toll.

Some have argued that support for the war must be superficial. The Kremlin's pro-war events appear staged, like the obscene warfest at Luzhniki stadium last month, where pop singers and politicians adorned with the pro-war symbol Z entertained an unenthusiastic audience of tens of thousands of people bussed in for the occasion.

But these arguments misunderstand Russian society today and how Putin's regime functions. The Kremlin's political messaging instrumentalises trauma to impose and ensure political apathy – hence Putin and his close advisers' invocation of Stalinist language, of the chaotic criminality of the 1990s and the ever-constant threat of Nazism at Russia's gates. These deliberate reminders of the worst eras of Russian history – of repression, anarchy and external existential threat – are meant to deter people from expressing political opinions.

The Kremlin doesn't trust anyone with political leanings, viewing those who really believe in the war as potentially uncontrollable. It is much safer to pay, or order, *budzhetniki* (public sector workers) to attend a pro-war rally to create a picture of support. But it doesn't mean there isn't genuine support out there as well, just that it is simply safer to remove elements of spontaneity.

Research has shown that Russians who approve of military action in Ukraine do so for different reasons: because they believe the propaganda, because they harbour imperialist views, because they see military action as self-defence against a Nato attack, because they are patriots who stand by their 'country, right or wrong', or because they just do and can't really explain why.

Whatever the reason, for the medium-term at least it would be reckless to expect any softening of this support. This is in large part because the Russian media is now amplifying its hysteria, justifying the military's embarrassing performance by claiming that Kyiv is trying to turn what Russia intended as a special military operation into a war with Nato and the entire West.

Seeing state media as a purely top-down cynical imposition of messaging misses the point

In this information environment – and increasingly few Russians have access to any other one – it would be reasonable to expect support to deepen, especially as conflict is in itself a radicalising force. Moreover, the Kremlin has effectively presented its invasion of Kyiv as a defensive war, to protect Russian speakers, Russia's sphere of influence and even Russia's very right to exist as a sovereign country. Kremlin propaganda on such points is effective because it is pervasive, consistent, emotive – and because it sells people a vision of the world they want to buy. Like so much in Putin's Russia, seeing state media as a purely top-down cynical imposition of messaging misses the point. These narratives are often co-creations, chosen because they resonate with audiences. Much state-controlled media is still reliant on advertising revenue for income. Of course, the state has an effective editorial veto and it can scare away advertisers, but within these parameters TV stations still need to pull in viewers. One way to appeal to people is to sell them a vision of themselves that flatters their egos while caricaturing their enemies. Don't we all prefer to see ourselves as the hero and our opponents as the villain?

'It's coming as a shock to this generation that modern tech can't fix everything.'

Imagine you are a Russian mother and your son, conscripted into the army, died fighting in Ukraine. You have heard horrible rumours that the war isn't like it is described on TV, that Russian soldiers have done terrible things, that they were looting, raping and killing. But what mother would want to believe her son died at best as a pawn in an evil war and at worst as an active participant in war crimes? And that his body was abandoned somewhere in Ukraine because his fellow soldiers prioritised transporting their looted goods over his corpse? Nobody would choose to believe this depiction when there is an alternative version in which their son died a hero, fighting Nazism.

Sanctions and economic pain are a similarly emotional issue for Russians. It is easier to accept any form of suffering if you can treat it as a sacrifice made willingly in the name of some higher purpose. Sanctions are presented, and largely perceived, as a western attack on Russia and Russians, so surviving them without protest is a patriotic duty, a pledge to Russia's civilisational battle.

In this atmosphere, tragedy, loss and economic pain will lead to more Russians becoming more resistant to alternative views as they invest ever greater meaning in the war. The cost of admitting the truth only becomes more painful.

Dr Jade McGlynn is a senior researcher at the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies.

Exclusive subscriber rewards

Spectator Winemaker event – Waddesdon Manor

Friday 10 June, 11am – 5pm, £375 per person

Join *Spectator* drinks editor Jonathan Ray for a very special day of wine and culture at Waddesdon Manor, the great Rothschild mansion near Aylesbury, Bucks.

A private guided tour of the house and its celebrated collection of art, sculpture and furniture will be followed by a tutored tasting of six Rothschild wines, including 2017 Los Vascos 'Le Dix' (Chile), 2018 Bodegas Caro (Argentina), 2009 Ch. Duhart-Milon (Pauillac) and the mighty 1996 Ch. Lafite Rothschild (Pauillac) and a three-course lunch in the Manor Restaurant.

To book and for further details, visit
spectator.co.uk/tastings

SPECTATOR CLUB

DOUGLAS MURRAY

Being reasonable isn't easy

Some years ago there was a study at Harvard that tried to find out what people did when they held an incorrect opinion. Not an opinion of the kind that the era happens to deem incorrect, but one that is actually, provably not the case. The study looked at what happened when that factually incorrect view was introduced to the evidence that it was wrong.

We might hope that the results would be clear: man holding wrong view meets the right view, immediately throws up his hands and asks himself how he could have been such a dolt. Alas, as anyone who has ever been married will know, people do not always concede wrongly held views as swiftly as that. And so the Harvard study showed. When people with an incorrect view were introduced to the correct view, a vast proportion doubled down on their wrong opinion and thenceforth refused to budge.

I am slightly haunted by this study because of how much it says about us human beings. We like to think of ourselves as reasonable, rational types. After all, you rarely meet someone who confesses to being unreasonable and irrational. But we do not really know ourselves, and if reason and rationalism alone drove us then we would be something else entirely. While we are sometimes motivated by reason, we are also fuelled by pride, jealousy and much more.

Changing our mind must count as one of the most curious processes we go through. Indeed, we do not always notice we are going through it. Look at those politicians who seem to become more and more reasonable to you – or the opposite. Is it they who have changed? Or you?

And then there is the question of whether there is any price to pay for changing your mind, or being seen to do so.

Whenever I see Jeremy Corbyn speaking I feel a pang of pity. Although he can be fiery, the poor man always seems tired – not to say exasperated. As well he might be. He has expressed the same few views for 40 or 50 years, and has not changed them one iota. There are some people who admire this, and think that never changing your mind, or your stump speech, is a virtue. But we also know that it can be a sign of other things, including – although not limited to – fanaticism, absolutism and a rather obvious lack of intelligence and curiosity.

But just as holding on to the same views can bring trouble, so can appearing to change your mind. I was thinking about this recently when trying to parse a statement released by the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams.

Before Williams became Archbish everyone rather admired him. Then he had to try to run the Church of England, and hold the whole thing together, and he seemed to become less and less intelligent with time. I called for his resignation once, and reminded him of this face to face when we found ourselves uncomfortably on the same side of a debate some years later at the Cambridge Union. I semi-apologised to him afterwards at drinks, saying that I really did have to stress to the students what a catastrophic archbishop I thought he had been. 'Oh no, Douglas,' he said, with that look of a beaten-up sheep, 'it was certainly a brilliant tactical move on your part to present both of the other people on your own side as complete dumbos.'

If rationalism alone drove human beings, we would be something else entirely

Anyhow, I only ever really disliked him because of his infamous comments backing sharia law for British Muslims. But another thing Williams did while he was Archbishop of Canterbury was to oppose every one of the British government's proposals on gay unions. He led the church as it opposed civil partnerships and gay marriage. Under Williams, the church did not only oppose the blessing of same-sex unions in churches – as it certainly had the right to do – but also opposed such unions existing in secular law.

'You know the saying... if you have to ask, you can't afford it.'

As it happens, I don't hold any of this against him. Williams was simply steering, or being steered by, the views of the Church of England at that time. But it does make his intervention into the trans debate even more confusing. Because last week Williams was one of a group of people to sign a letter to the Prime Minister about the issue of conversion therapy.

As I have described here before, conversion therapy now means two different things. It means what people think it means (trying to persuade gay people that they are not gay) and it also means raising any questions about whether a child with so-called 'gender dysphoria' should be medicalised to approximate the appearance of the opposite sex. I am very much in favour of people having the right to question this latter course.

The letter that Williams signed was furiously pro-trans, against 'conversion therapy' and absolute in its belief that trans people are obvious, clear and never to be questioned. Indeed Williams appears to have found a whole theology to encompass the new trans goddess of the era. The line that stood out was this one: 'To be trans is to enter a sacred journey of becoming whole.'

When I read this I was immediately put in mind of Canon Jeffrey John and other gay people whom Williams put through a kind of torture while he was archbishop, all because he could not recognise gay relationships as being in any way on a parallel with straight ones.

Again, I do not hold this view against him. But how can it be wrong for somebody to be in a committed same-sex relationship, whereas having a double mastectomy or a clitorectomy, or having part of a leg or arm flayed in order to have something resembling a penis stitched to the abdomen (sorry about the details), is part of 'a sacred journey'? I do not know what the answer is. I wonder if Dr Williams knows?

Workshy Whitehall

Too few civil servants are returning to the office

JAMES HEALE

'Mother nature,' says Boris Johnson, 'does not like working from home.' The Prime Minister wants workers to return to offices so they can have the 'stimulus of exchange and competition'. His ministers are just as evangelical. Kwasi Kwarteng, the Business Secretary, says he favours 'being able to interact directly' with colleagues and Rishi Sunak has spoken about how young people need the office space to learn. The nation's employers should, they say, get their staff back to their desks.

Yet nine months since the end of lockdown and tumbleweed is still blowing through the corridors of power. When Jacob Rees-Mogg conducted an audit to see how many Whitehall desks were occupied on 4 April, it found the answer was just a quarter at the Education and the Work and Pensions departments. In the Foreign Office, it was less than a third. On average, almost half of Whitehall desks were empty. Steve Barclay, the cabinet officer minister, had promised that the government would 'lead the way' in returning to work from January – but if that is the case then civil servants are simply refusing to follow. No wonder Johnson now sees the army as the solution to any given domestic problem: soldiers report for duty in a way that he is unable to persuade civil servants to do.

Civil service chiefs say the mandarins are back at work, but using 'hybrid working': two or three days in the office and the rest at home. Union bosses point to Johnson's competing desire to 'level up' areas outside London to justify this. If 20,000 jobs are set to be moved out of the capital anyway, why bring existing staff back into SW1? And then there are the practicalities of office working. The size of the government estate has been shrunk by more than 30 per cent since 2010 as part of a policy to sell off Whitehall sites. Yet the civil service headcount has grown a quarter since 2016.

Poor estate planning and the growth of the state under Johnson mean there are not enough desks to accommodate the army of bureaucrats if they did all come back. In a farcical example of short-term thinking, the Treasury still pays thousands to the Cabinet Office for use of extra office space, despite the fact just two in five staff showed up on the day of Rees-Mogg's audit.

The civil service is fighting hard to keep the idea that showing up for work need not be obligatory. Its trade union, First Division Association, dislikes ministers issuing orders at all, saying they should not be 'interfering'. A poll showed (unsurprisingly) that 97 per cent of civil servants want to keep the option of working from home. It's easy to see the attractions. People who previously worked full-time in Whitehall still receive their special salary boosts – known as 'London weighting' – worth around £4,000 to cover the costs of working and travelling in the city. Pay rises also do not distinguish between those who are returning to office and those who aren't.

Nine months since the end of lockdown, tumbleweed is blowing through the corridors of power

It could be argued that it doesn't matter where civil servants are as long as the work gets done. After all, look outside Whitehall: Deloitte, one of Britain's biggest accountancy firms, has told staff they can decide for themselves how often they work from home and has closed 250,000 square feet of London office space. Official UK productivity figures actually recorded a rise last year, a figure highlighted by those who say that home working doesn't hurt.

But what works for accountants does not necessarily work for government departments where communication and accountability are crucial. Elizabeth Denham, then the £180,000-a-year Information Commissioner, decided after the first lockdown to pack up and do her job 4,500 miles away in her native British Columbia. (Her move was only belatedly discovered after – ironically – a Freedom of Information request showed she was working from a location within the Pacific Time Zone.) Since west Canada is eight hours behind the UK, such a decision had obvious consequences for the privacy watchdog's working habits.

Then there was the withdrawal from Kabul in August, when translators and others deemed at risk from the Taliban applied to Whitehall to be evacuated. During the crisis, the Foreign Office doggedly clung to a culture of eight-hour working days. Staff were urged not to work longer in case others felt pressured to do the same. Raphael Marshall, a Foreign Office desk officer involved in the evacuation, later revealed that emails with desperate messages from Afghans were either not opened or were just scanned without any details being logged in so ministers could say that they had been read.

'Staffing shortages were exacerbated by some staff working from home,' he said, 'which hampered communication. This was on occasion significant in a context where policy was poorly defined and the situation unclear.' Sir Philip Barton, the most senior Foreign Office civil servant, stayed on holiday throughout the worst of the crisis and only returned from his family's Dordogne chateau 11 days after Kabul fell.

The Afghan debacle reflects a story told by many younger officials: they are keen to come into the office, but are discouraged by more senior staff who seek to preserve the

new work-from-home culture. As one puts it: 'If someone in another department was ignoring my emails, I used to walk across Whitehall to go and speak to them face to face. Now they can simply hide behind their screen – it's maddening.' The Ukraine crisis has been a tacit admission of the importance of physical co-location: mandarins working on the British response have been told they need to be at their desks every day.

Conscientious civil servants are aware of (and often outraged by) scams being pulled by less industrious colleagues, who use the near-absence of supervision to develop a culture of skiving, from 'compressed working hours' downwards. There are 'development days' off work and weekly wellbeing hours – paid for by the taxpayer – intended to nurture 'mental and/or physical health' on top of the daily lunch hour. One official working from home confesses that he often books a 'meeting' and then uses the time to go to the gym because no one senior checks on or disturbs him. Some of the online training for 'mandatory professional development' seems less than rigorous too. One caseworker boasts on LinkedIn of 'doing some civil service learning courses' while watching daytime TV.

If there is no supervision across government agencies, then things can go badly wrong. It was recently revealed that for significant periods of the pandemic 3,400 civil

servants at the DVLA (more than half the staff) had done no work on full pay. Months later, there were still almost 2,000 DVLA workers raking it in while not working.

Blockages in one part of the system affect it elsewhere. One MP says that, at the end of last year, a quarter of all constituency correspondence was about driving-licence backlogs. Home working meant there were huge delays in processing paper-based applications. Passports, planning applications and HMRC rebates have all been affected.

Working from home has been cited as a factor in the visa delays for Ukrainian refugees

The prosecution backlog is perhaps the worst of all. 'It's so bad that if someone is raped today it will take two years before the perpetrator would be in court,' says one minister. 'The magistrates' courts managed to carry on, but the criminal courts just downed tools. Justice delayed is justice denied – and we're now denying justice on a mass scale.' The most recent figures show that there were 58,000 cases outstanding in the Crown Court in the final quarter of last year, down just 2 per cent on the previous quarter.

The asylum backlog could arguably have been cleared during lockdown, given the country's emergency border closures. Instead, the number of people awaiting a decision doubled to 85,000. Home working has also been cited as a factor in the visa delays for Ukrainian refugees.

Ultimately, civil servants themselves could lose out from Whitehall's new working arrangements. 'Previously we could at least learn at our desks from older colleagues about how a department works,' says one younger official. 'Now that ability has been much more curtailed.'

The strengths of the civil service are supposedly its permanence, institutional knowledge and ability to produce 'good all-rounders'. Hybrid working puts all that at risk. The Prime Minister now looks simply unable to control his government – incapable of reversing the effects of the 'work from home' orders he once imposed.

THE SPECTATOR

ONLINE EVENT

Building opportunities

Regenerating Britain's left-behind communities

Thursday 28 April | 10.30am–12.30pm

Join *The Spectator*'s Andrew Neil and special guests as they explore how deprived regions and communities can be given the tools and resources to grow.

Visit spectator.co.uk/skills to register for free.

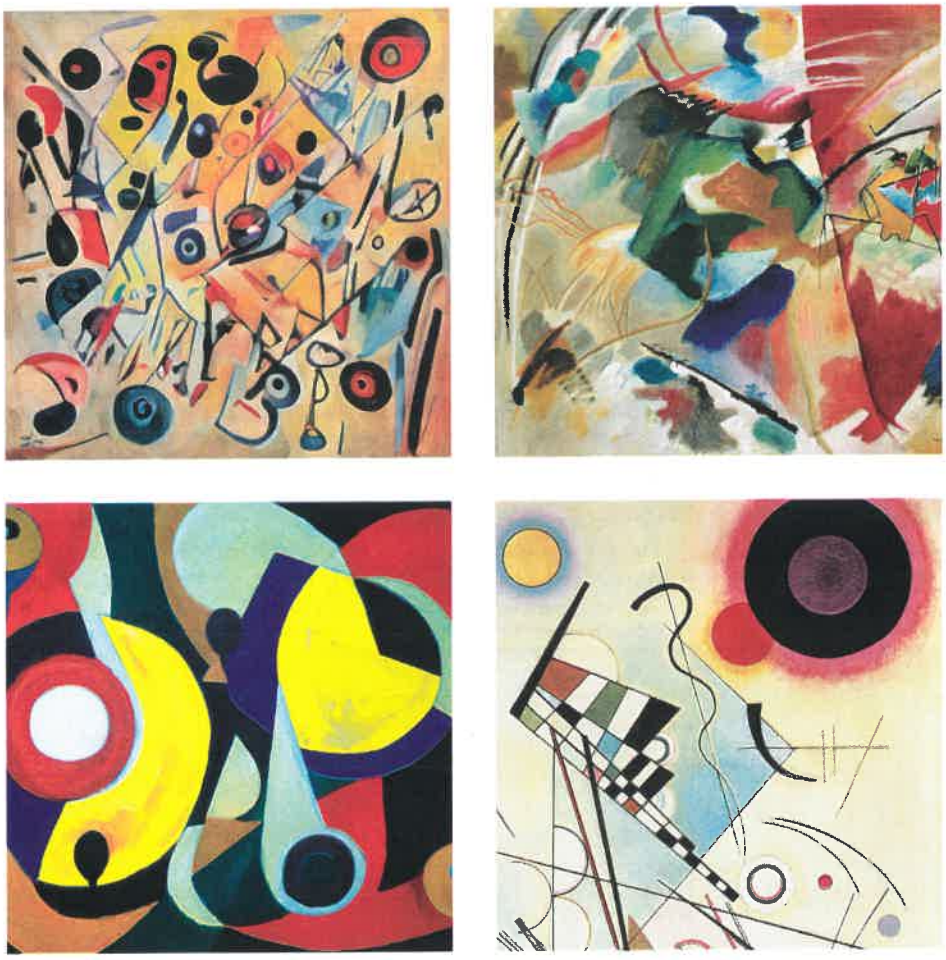
IN ASSOCIATION WITH

BAE SYSTEMS

Art attack

Will AI change painting – or destroy it?

SEAN THOMAS



Which ones are the real Kandinskys?

Take a look at the four paintings on this page. If you are acquainted with modern art, you will probably assume, at a quick glance, that it shows four works by the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). However, whatever your knowledge of modern art, I suggest you look again, because not all of these works are by that great pioneer of abstract painting. More than one of them is an original image created by a computer model, which was asked to do a digital artwork in the style of Kandinsky.

Which are the fakes? I'll give you the answer at the end of the article. Before we get there, you need to know how a computer can make such startlingly echoic images, and what it might mean for art.

This story begins with 'GPT1' (the initialism means 'Generative Pre-trained Transformer'). Launched on the world in 2018, GPT1 was a computer model created by a company called OpenAI (part-funded by Elon Musk and closely associated with Microsoft). GPT1 was another stage in the attempt, by multiple scientists and software engineers worldwide, 'to discover and enact the path to safe Artificial Intelligence' (OpenAI's description of its own goal).

With '117 million parameters' – each one roughly equivalent to a synapse in the human brain, of which there are around a quadrillion (1,000 trillion) – GPT1 utilised a technique called Natural Language Processing. Essentially the computer was fed lots of near-random everyday information, like a goose being stuffed with corn, thereby hoping to produce the foie gras of Artificial General Intelligence. The experiment was deemed intriguing but not particularly successful, causing only a modest stir.

A year later, OpenAI tried again with GPT2, which was ten times bigger (1.5 billion parameters); the fuss was likewise larger, but still limited to software circles. Finally, in 2020, OpenAI released GPT3. One hundred times bigger (175 billion parameters), GPT3 was trained on the entire internet, from Wikipedia to Reddit, from Google Books to the *New York Times*. And this time OpenAI's assault on the Everest of true machine intelligence caught the attention of a wider world.

The reason for this is that GPT3, which remains the biggest and best 'neural net-

TOP LEFT, EBO A/ TENSORDOCK; BOTTOM LEFT, DALL·E 2/KANDINSKYS; GETTY IMAGES

work' on the planet (though others are working on their own larger equivalents), seems reasonably capable of almost anything. It can write code. It can write blog posts. It can write plausible Wikipedia entries for things that don't exist. It wrote, with editorial assistance, a *Guardian* article. It produces music, scripts, poems, aperçus, advertising copy, philosophical profundities ('the purpose of life is to increase the beauty in the universe') and short stories in the style of Jerome K. Jerome. It does not always do this well, and seldom perfectly, but is often good enough.

How does it do this? Put simply, GPT3 is a galaxy-sized autocomplete machine. If you prompt it with a few words, it will run with what you've said and logically autocomplete it, in the same vein, for paragraph after paragraph (until it starts spewing gibberish – GPT3 often seems to run out of puff).

This machine is intelligent – and also racist, sexist and prone to nihilism. It was, after all, fed Reddit and Twitter

At times, the quasi-self-aware output of GPT3 can appear uncannily like human intelligence – or at least a super-clever simulacrum of it. It is, for instance, a deeply unsettling sensation to be told a genuinely funny joke by a computer. Despite all this, most experts still firmly deny that GPT3 is 'intelligent', let alone 'conscious', though some have posited that all intelligence may be a form of autocomplete: reflexive responses to stimuli. If that is true, this machine is already intelligent – and also racist, sexist and prone to nihilism. It was, after all, fed all of Reddit and Twitter. This is why direct access to GPT3 is still restricted.

The story evolved last year, when someone tried asking GPT3 to create images from language prompts. Specifically, GPT3 was prompted to produce 'an illustration of a baby daikon radish in a tutu walking a dog'. And then GPT3 did exactly that. Multiple times. This was astonishing as no one expected GPT3 to have this capability. The programmers themselves could not understand how GPT3 succeeded at the task.

Pretty soon GPT's new capability was spun off into a model of its own, called Dall-e (a wordplay on the Pixar robot movie *Wall-E* and Salvador Dali). People with access to Dall-e reported that it could successfully design websites, logos and corporate brands, again by autocompleting.

Now, a year later, OpenAI has launched Dall-e 2. Although inspired by its predecessor, Dall-e 2 uses a different processing method, termed 'diffusion': it takes natural language prompts like 'make an image of teddy bears on the moon, who are using 1980s technology' and using its visual comprehension of each of these concepts – teddy bears, moon, 1980s tech – it zeroes in on the prompt, boiling off the random pixels, until it coughs up an image. The image on contents (page 5), for example, is Dall-e 2's response to one particular prompt: 'A raccoon astronaut, with the cosmos reflecting on the glass of his helmet, dreaming of the stars.'

If you're like me, your reaction to this entirely original image will be, first, sweet Holy Jesus, and second, what does this mean for every artist in the world? That a whirring computer can – in a few moments – answer a pictorial brief so accurately, and poetically?

My answer, in these very early days of Dall-e 2, is not encouraging for artists. Basically, don't send your kids to art college. Because Dall-e 2 is possibly going to destroy many of the commercial art jobs in the world, i.e. the jobs of illustrators, cartoonists, graphic designers and the makers of book covers. The fine artists will survive because people will always want prestige works by famous humans, but the rest: ouch.

Dall-e 2 (and remember there will soon be Dall-e 3 and 4 and 5, each superior to the last) might also cause problems for auction houses, once the machine learns how to create in real life, via 3D printing. Because we can already see that Dall-e 2 has a superb capacity for 'forgery'. Indeed Dall-e's makers are hyperaware of the dangers of Dall-e creating deepfakes of real humans, which is why Dall-e is explicitly designed, like a racing car with a built-in speed limit, to be bad at imaging human faces and bodies. It is therefore better at abstracts.

Which brings us back to the four Kandinskys on the previous page. I put this test to quite a few people, and about four out of ten got it right. This suggests that computers have already passed a kind of 'artistic Turing test': humans cannot differentiate between the output of a famous human artist and a data-crunching computer. In this case one image was created by a programme called Elbo AI, which launched in February, as a competitor to Open-AI; the other is by Dall-e 2.

And the answer to my original puzzle? The fake Kandinskys, created by mere machines, are the two on the left. The top left is by Elbo AI, and the bottom left is by Dall-e 2.

'So cool – it's like an NFT you can hang on your wall!'

BAROMETER

Park the issue

Gladstone Park in Brent may be renamed as a result of the former PM's connections with slavery. Local children have suggested Multi-Faith Park or Diversity Fields.
– Gladstone often used to stay as a guest of Lord Aberdeen at Dollis Hill House, which is in the park. Lord Rosebery was also a regular guest, as was Lord Randolph Churchill, father of Winston. Mark Twain also stayed. The park was named after Gladstone because when it was purchased for public use in 1899 he had recently died.

Against the current

How successful was Australia's policy of processing asylum applications offshore for any migrant who arrives by boat? The figures are for migrants arriving by boat:

1998	**200**	2000	**2,939**
1999	**3,721**	2001	**5,561**

Offshore processing starts under John Howard

2002	**1**	2006	**60**
2003	**53**	2007	**148**
2004	**15**	2008	**161**
2005	**11**		

Kevin Rudd's government scraps policy

2009	**2,726**	2012	**17,204**
2010	**6,555**	2013	**20,587**
2011	**4,565**		

Julia Gillard's government reintroduces policy

2014	**160**	2016	**0**
2015	**0**		

Source: Parliament of Australia

Fare's unfair

The government announced a 'rail sale'. UK train tickets for a 150-mile journey as compared with France, Italy and Germany:
London-Sheffield: **£12.50** (if booked one month ahead); **£22** (for travel tomorrow); **£69.50** (for immediate off-peak travel); **£104** (for immediate peak-hours travel)
Paris-Dijon corresponding prices: **£25, £70, £41, £41**
Rome-Florence: **£25, £36, £36, £36**
Nuremburg-Kassel: **£29, £61, £61, £61**
Source: www.seat61.com

Fine line

How do fines for Downing Street parties in lockdown compare with speeding fines?
— In 2017, **176,441** speeding fines were given in England. But according to DfT figures, **46%** of cars on the motorway were found to be breaking the speed limit, along with **52%** of vehicles on 30mph roads.
– From Mar 20-Oct 21, police issued **106,451** fixed penalty notices for breaking lockdown rules. But according to leaked government documents in June 2020, **50%** of people admitted to breaking the rules. In March 2021, the ONS found that **43%** of over-eighties admitted breaking the rules.

Hotel Rwanda

Why is Paul Kagame agreeing to accommodate Britain's asylum seekers?

MICHELA WRONG

If President Paul Kagame has been tracking the furore over Priti Patel's plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, he's been doing it on the hoof. Kagame moves constantly these days: the news broke while he was en route to Barbados after a visit to Jamaica. In the past two months he has been to Congo-Brazzaville, Kenya (twice), Zambia, Germany (twice), Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, Mauritania, Senegal and Belgium.

How the president of one of Africa's poorest nations can afford all this travelling is a puzzle, and the fact that his Gulfstream jet is supplied by Crystal Ventures, his Rwandan Patriotic Front's monopolistic investment arm, raises interesting budgetary questions. In a country where checks on the executive have been whittled away, the dividing line between a ruling party's business interests and the presidential expense account is distinctly blurred.

Rwandan opposition critics wonder if he is scouting where best to stash his assets in preparation for the day every African leader dreads, when a military coup dispatches him into exile. Others speculate he just feels safer on the road, validated by every red carpet and guard of honour.

More likely, the globetrotting forms part of a decades-long drive to establish Kagame as Africa's de facto leader-in-chief, not only an indispensable partner for any western government engaging with the continent, but a source of radical solutions to nagging domestic problems. While running a country only slightly larger than Sicily, Kagame punches so far above his weight, the boxing ring looks dwarfed by his presence. He is the Mighty Mouse of the African Great Lakes.

It's clear why it suits Ms Patel to send her political undesirables to Rwanda. Back in 2003, Oliver Letwin, then the shadow home secretary, spoke about sending asylum seekers to a foreign island 'far, far away' – but the problem was finding a place that would agree. In Kagame, they have found someone who craves the limelight and is hugely skilled at identifying western needs. In return he seeks an airbrushing of regional history – and support for a narrative that presents him as a leader who single-handedly brought peace to a genocide-devastated nation and oversaw a developmental miracle.

In July last year, after a jihadist group paralysed a $20 billion liquefied gas installation run by France's Total in Mozambique, it was Kagame who dispatched 1,000 Rwandan soldiers and policemen to Cabo Delgado to send the rebels packing. Long before Patel flew to Kigali, Denmark's government had been discussing a similar offshore arrangement, and before that, Rwanda agreed to take in thousands of Eritrean and Sudanese asylum seekers whom the then Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu wanted rid of.

But for these arrangements to be acceptable to domestic audiences – and to portray Rwanda as a safe place – Kagame's western partners must gloss over one of the most sinister human rights records of any current African regime. And that is not easy, given how much evidence is in the public domain.

What was striking about the statements made by Boris Johnson, Patel and Tom Pursglove last week was their blank ahistoricism. Rwanda is ruled by a political party with a 32-year record of human rights violations – the killings date back to before the movement seized power in 1994 – but this was omitted from the spin about the 'UK-Rwanda partnership' for which the Home Office has designed a snappy logo.

How will a system in which killings are commonplace absorb single men already fleeing repressive regimes?

It's understood that Patel had to issue a 'ministerial direction' for her plan, overruling staunch and formal objections from her department. Perhaps Home Office officials thought it odd to portray as safe a country implicated in the slaughter of tens of thousands of Hutu civilians in the forests of neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo in 1996 and 1997. UN investigators logged hundreds of atrocities committed by Rwandan troops, in cahoots with Congolese rebel allies – some 100,000 people remain unaccounted for.

The UK-Rwanda partnership also glosses over a recent report by Freedom House in which Rwanda was cited for its track record of 'transnational repression': the systematic assassinations, attempted killings, kidnappings and intimidation of opposition leaders, human rights activists and journalists the world over. In 2011, the Metropolitan Police felt impelled to warn three exiled Rwandan activists living in London that their government was trying to have them killed.

Kagame has played this same game superbly with France, whereby a judicial investigation into who downed the plane in which the late president Juvénal Habyarimana was travelling has been shelved, allowing President Emmanuel Macron to publicly embrace a man his predecessors once tried to arrest.

In return for exculpation, Kagame has repeatedly offered up his army, sending troops into places where western governments have no intention of sending their own men: hotspots like the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Darfur, Mali and Haiti.

Sceptics might argue that whatever happened to the Hutus in those forests, and whatever the gruesome fate of Rwanda's former interior minister – shot in his car in Nairobi – or its former head of external intelligence – strangled in a South African hotel room – the regime treats non-Rwandan arrivals decently enough. United Nations chiefs, after all, recently commended Rwanda for its reception of hundreds of refugees airlifted from Libya's detention centres.

But even that record is patchy. In 2018 the Congolese inhabitants of Kiziba, one of Rwanda's six refugee camps, protested at having their miserly $9 monthly food rations cut to $6. Rwandan police opened fire on a demonstration, with a dozen killed. Community leaders from the camp were prosecuted and are still in jail.

And if the aim is really for those flown to Rwanda to 'settle and thrive', the question becomes how easily a system in which killings and disappearances are commonplace and freedom of speech impossible will absorb thousands of single men already fleeing repressive regimes. Many of the Eritreans and Sudanese flown to Rwanda from Israel simply hit the road again.

We can expect none of these issues to get an honest airing as long as Britain pursues this offshore deal: Britain, like France, will have instead made the transition from engaged, occasionally critical bilateral donor to Stepford Wife-style complicity.

Michela Wrong is the author of Do Not Disturb: The Story of a Political Murder and an African Regime Gone Bad, *published by HarperCollins.*

JULIE BURCHILL

The rise of the wimps

I was extra pleased to have swerved the modern curse that is Wordle when I read that 'sensitive' words have been removed from it. A spokesman proclaimed: 'In an effort to make the puzzle more accessible, we are reviewing the solutions and removing obscure or potentially insensitive words over time. HARRY is an example of an obscure word.' Other more obviously 'insensitive' words had already been removed, such as 'sluts,' 'bitch' and 'whore', and though I'm the most rad of femmes, I do wish they'd stayed. Removing ribaldry makes the language increasingly bland.

'Sensitivity' is one of those words that's changed its meaning. It was once used mostly to refer to sore teeth and gums. But just as 'community' now means people complaining and 'activist' now means sitting at home swearing on the internet, to be sensitive simply signifies you're politically progressive.

In 2015, in this magazine, I invented the term cry-bully to describe a new type: 'A hideous hybrid of victim and victor, weeper and walloper.' Cry-bullies are everywhere, the duplicitous Pushmi-Pullyus of the personal and the political. And for a cry-bully, almost everything's too insensitive. They're 'empaths', they say, deeply disturbed by anything unpleasant.

If it was just Gen Z being soppy, you could slightly excuse it. But when middle-aged men and women who you respected for their apparent insouciance claim to be 'empaths', it's hard not to despair. Witness John Lydon saying that punk was about 'empathy'. Really? From where I was standing – right at the front of the crowd at the Screen on the Green – it was about anger and spite. But no doubt I got the wrong end of the stick. The Sex Pistols took issue with everyone, from girls who had abortions ('Bodies') to the Queen (not a human being, apparently). If this is empathy, then surely it's only a matter of time before the surviving members of the Clash pop up and tell us that the line from their song 'Hate and War' – 'I hate Englishmen, they're just as bad as wops!' – was a profoundly empathetic cry for international brotherhood.

I know that narcissists are public enemy number one these days, but if I had to live in a world solely composed of narcissists or empaths, I'd choose the former for the simple reason that it would be more fun. Under the influence of the sensitivity police, *Coronation Street*, once a haven of wisecracking broads and brawling sex-bombs, has become one long therapy session wherein the formerly feisty female characters inhabit ceaseless hamster wheels of being 'in bits', 'destroyed' and 'broken'.

I know that we've come out of a two-year pandemic with untold economic woes just around the corner, but it surely can't be only me who wakes up each morning excited about facing yet another day in this beautiful world? And even if a lot of us are mis, shouldn't entertainment elevate rather than lower our mood?

The elevation of sensitivity over all other human emotions makes for a bland culture

If television is getting you down, why not escape into a good book? Better make it an old one though. Ever since publishers started to employ sensitivity readers, modern books have been free from old-fashioned escapist fun.

As Zoe Dubno has written in *The Spectator*: 'For critics, these individuals [sensitivity readers] are the latest stage of the culture wars: woke-ifying new books before readers even have the chance to read them. For publishers they offer a seductively cheap way of reducing the risk of a book or its author being cancelled and the ensuing reputational and profit damage to the firm… Often it seems less like a check on upsetting and harmful language than a safeguard against white, straight, middle-class authors and publishers needing to change their social circles, ideologies or publishing staff in any way.'

'And how are you at thinking on your feet?

Young Adult novels are especially sensitive to sensitivity; my 2004 teenage novel *Sugar Rush* probably wouldn't be allowed today, as one of the young lesbians would need to be trans and I wouldn't, as a white woman, be allowed to write a mixed-race heroine. (Oddly, the demographic which is most 'sensitive' about fictional violence is the same one which favours as a leisure pursuit what I call 'Netflix and kill': the true-crime genre – deaths of real people rendered down into entertainment.)

Where once we could laugh at the overly sensitive for being wimps, now the wimps have got together and agreed they they're simply special, some higher order of being, able to look down on the plebs who can take the hard knocks life routinely hands out and prance merrily on, without recourse to the law or the shrink. 'Highly Sensitive People' (HSPs) are the latest belles of the Mental Elf Ball, with Nicole Kidman, Alanis Morissette and Kanye West claiming membership. That last one should be a dead giveaway. I wouldn't want to be part of any club Kanye West belonged to.

The elevation of sensitivity over all other human emotions makes for a bland culture; spite is the Tabasco in the Bloody Mary of life, and it often does the recipient good.

Once we were allowed to be cruel to be kind if the situation called for it: yes, your bum does look big in that; no, you shouldn't waste your time trying to be a writer. Now, if we are not kind to an extreme degree, we will be demonised. I understand that some people are tender, but that doesn't mean the tough should have to mute themselves. The next time a joke offends, maybe try replying in kind rather than violently? Quipping well is the best revenge.

Shanghai's shame

China's lockdown protestors cannot be silenced

CINDY YU

For weeks, Shanghai's 25 million residents were assured that they would not be locked down. Then when the order came, the lockdown was supposed to last only seven days. It is now almost into its fourth week, and the government is struggling to suppress the chaos.

Last week, 82-year-old Yu Wenming called his neighbourhood committee to say he had run out of medicine and food. Rather than reassure him, the local official despaired. 'I am really helpless,' he admitted. 'I'm more sad than you are, because you are just one person. I see countless families…' The elderly Mr Yu ended up comforting the worker. When a recording of their conversation was posted online, it was shared rapidly. By the time it was deleted, the damage was done.

As health workers battle omicron, China's infamous censors have their own fight – and it's not one that they are winning. On Weibo and WeChat, people post videos, phone-call recordings and lengthy blogs to protest and humiliate authorities into doing better. A video showing mothers separated from children in hospital caused national outrage. Another filmed in Shanghai's Minhang district showed residents chanting 'We want to eat' and 'We want freedom'. One young man recorded his phone call to the police, asking: 'If I break lockdown and you arrest me, will I at least have some food to eat?'

It's not easy to censor a billion internet users. Most Chinese are now digitally literate: even my 82-year-old grandmother in Nanjing uses WeChat. Censorship methods have been honed over the years, with social media platforms asked to do the policing. Every week, the central government briefs them on banned words and topics, depending on the controversy of the day. It's down to the companies to do the censoring. Social media platforms either have in-house 'web administrators' or use external contractors (professional censors, if you will). These are typically apathetic, apolitical millennials who are briefed on the darkest moments of Chinese history in order to cut out any references. They're helped by bots which scan for keywords and text embedded in pictures.

But humans can be outpaced and bots can be fooled. It's common to refer to sensitive topics using English abbreviations (e.g. 'zf' to refer to the government, or *zhengfu*). Memes are used which have a covert meaning. An empty chair signifies the late dissident Liu Xiaobo, for example, who received his Nobel Peace Prize in absentia. Weibo censors must have clocked off on the night of 13 April, because a deluge of unfiltered criticism of the Chinese government was posted under the guise of criticising America, which presumably avoided keyword triggers.

This game of cat-and-mouse sometimes leads to absurd outcomes. The first line of the Chinese national anthem – 'Arise, those who do not wish to be slaves!' – is currently restricted on Weibo because the phrase had been co-opted by lockdown critics.

Yet despite the subterfuge, social media is still a way for people to make their feelings known. They'll hardly be doing so in polling stations, after all. Photos of empty fridges and videos of police violence all put pressure on China's government, which prides itself on its ability to maintain order. And the CCP does care about public sentiment; in fact, millions of analysts are employed by various government departments and local authorities to trawl through social media to gauge what people are thinking. When a video was posted showing a corgi being bludgeoned to death by a health worker in a hazmat suit, the authorities had to respond. They said it was precautionary but admitted it was 'senseless' and apologised. State media would not have exposed such a scandal. Social media can.

Chinese people have managed to get the Shanghai authorities to U-turn on their policy of separating children and parents in quarantine. Elderly Mr Yu was taken into hospital the day after his call went viral. One video posted on Douyin (China's version of TikTok) shows a quarantined man shouting: 'You can lock us up, but you can't lock Douyin up!'

It's easy to assume that the Chinese government can cover up anything. But the Shanghai lockdown has tested the limits of its control. During that night of freedom when the censors briefly disappeared, one post stuck with me: 'This is the real voice of the people. Commemorate tonight… At least I know we are still awake. Though we travel in the darkness alone, there will be a day when we have the force of a prairie fire.'

SPECTATOR.CO.UK/WHISPERS
Listen to Cindy Yu's podcast on Chinese society, politics and more.

ANCIENT AND MODERN

Morale support

Commentators talk much about the morale of the Ukrainian troops and the edge that this has given them over the Russians, even in a technology-dominated conflict. Ancient warfare was a matter of hand-to-hand fighting, where morale is absolutely crucial – 'defeat in battle always starts with the eyes', said Tacitus – and the imperial Roman army offers a masterclass in how to generate it.

That army was, uniquely, professional. The soldiers' physical fitness, kit, mastery of weapons and technical training in battle tactics were second to none.

Their loyalty to the group was reinforced by the closely knit units of eight in which they lived, ate and slept, training and fighting with similar units, all coming together to form the larger units – centuries and cohorts – of which the legions consisted, and under the same officers too. Their job was to ensure they set them an example in training and in battle, earning their respect and trust. Some emperors even went into battle with their troops, as Julius Caesar had done – a tremendous morale-booster. Putin, of course, demanded his generals try to raise morale this way, but there was no morale for his generals to raise, so badly trained were the men.

Then again, the soldiers knew they would be cared for if things did not go their way. If killed in battle, they would be given proper burial; if wounded, proper treatment by army doctors and convalescence.

Finally, once they had served their term, they were pensioned off with a lump sum and perhaps land too in a place where they had served. We hear of soldiers who preferred to continue soldiering.

The emperor Augustus once insisted that no one should join battle unless the prospect of gain was demonstrably greater than the risk of loss. The Ukrainians, fighting for their freedom, do not have that option: they will win, or lose, everything. But if, in this technological age, high morale is the key to victory, how can they keep it as high as it has been? Does it depend on matching their enemy in raining unseen terror from the skies?

– Peter Jones

Soft ground

Sir: We have heard much over the years from the overseas aid lobby about the value of soft power. Now the chips are down, we see how empty those claims were. Aidan Hartley ('Russia's special relationship', 16 April) outlined how African nations have lined up to support Russia rather than Ukraine or the West, exposing how wasted the UK's investment in soft power has been. The same applies to aid given to Pakistan and India. The absurdity of an overseas aid target of 0.7 per cent (of GDP) must be abandoned and replaced by an 0.5 per cent spending ceiling, at or below which the UK's aid objectives in the third world must be seen to bring results. If we seek real influence in an increasingly unstable world, we need to rebuild our armed forces, which have been underfunded for nearly 20 years.
Gregory Shenkman
London SW7

Poor politics

Sir: Your leading article ('Keep the faith', 9 April) discussed whether the wealth of the Chancellor was a political problem. In common with many such articles, it did not focus enough on his political acumen. Taking 5p off the price of a litre of petrol was his big decision to help with the cost of living. A few weeks later this has been forgotten as the price of petrol goes up, and occasionally down, by more than that most days. It would have been so much more memorable and meaningful to reduce the cost of annual heating bills by a few hundred pounds. It was a total waste of money and very poor politics.
Johnny Cameron
Pewsey, Wiltshire

Holy wars

Sir: Justin Welby writes (Diary, 16 April) that religion has become an easy hook to hang conflict on. Why is that? It is because from the Crusades to the Reformation right through the centuries to the first world war, Bosnia, Ulster and Afghanistan, it is difficult to think of a conflict where religion was not a major aetiological factor. That is why it is easy.
Martin Henry
Good Easter, Essex

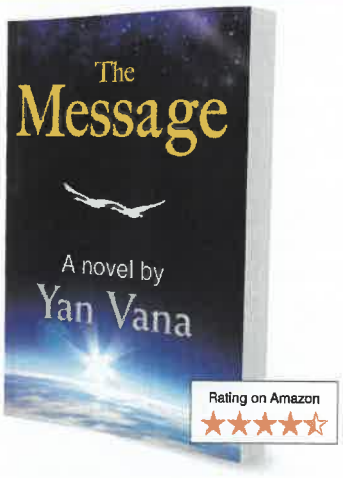
Theatre and theology

Sir: Charles Moore praised an apparently enigmatic but actually 'ironic' scene in the Fourth Gospel, which is 'peculiarly fascinating' because it is a superbly written drama (Notes, 16 April). The Passion section has resulted in orchestration by Bach and others, and it is high time that the entirety of this masterpiece of theatre as well as theology was accorded comparably sublime operatic treatment.
David Ashton
Sheringham, Norfolk

Harsh lessons

Sir: Mary Wakefield highlights the anxiety and depression children suffer in the face of constant negative news ('The kids aren't all right – and the grown-ups are to blame', 9 April). She suggests that schools can be to blame for contributing to this unease by the partisan manner in which subjects like global environmentalism are taught. I believe she is right. In my view the problem lies with a curriculum often obsessed with examining issues in a secondhand way which promotes contentious criticism at the expense of balanced understanding.

The pupils I taught knew all about the Amazon rainforest and its destruction, but were unable to identify the birds or trees beyond the classroom window. This meant they were not taught what was happening in the natural world around them. Had they studied their local habitats they would have developed a more balanced and nuanced view of their world rather than being exposed to a relentlessly worrying agenda.
Martin Offer
Pagham, West Sussex



"More and more people I hear from think we've left it too late. They may be right, but shouldn't we be trying something?"

Yan Vana

Buy Online: £9.95 plus P&P
www.yanvanathemessage.com

ISBN: 978-1527204966
info@falcondalepress.co.uk

The gig is up

Sir: As a gigging musician for 50-plus years I think I can illuminate Dot Wordsworth's statement that the word 'gig' is of unknown origin (Mind your language, 9 April). I was told in the 1960s that it was short for 'engagement' as opposed to a residency for a week or more; it meant a booking for a single engagement rather than for a run of work, which would be at a lower price per night. The term was in use in Archer Street, the Soho marketplace where bandleaders went to find musicians for either one-off gigs or sought-after residencies such as the one in the Strand Lyons Corner House which made bandleader Joe Loss's name (as Joe once told me).
Nigel Tully
Markyate, Hertfordshire

Friends like these

Sir: Damian Thompson's piece on the ever-decreasing circles of male friendships (9 April) cannot go unchallenged. In 2004, in this small city, we started a group called Chips (Chichester Independent Professionals). We meet at 12 noon on the first Friday of the month for a drink or two and lunch. Chips has only two rules: turn up on time, and no treating (we pay for our own food and drink). We now have friendships that have lasted for more than 18 years. There should be no lack of male friendships if we keep up strong links: perhaps Damian should start a similar group.
Mike Harvey
Chichester, West Sussex

The Big Dipper disaster

Sir: I take issue with Roger Lewis's assertion that the acquittal of Jeremy Thorpe, defended by George Carmen, was 'the greatest miscarriage of justice of modern times' ('Dogged by disaster', 9 April). I think there is a worse case. On 30 May 1972 the Big Dipper crashed in Battersea Park, killing five children and injuring 13 others, some seriously – including me. An inquiry found 66 faults with the Big Dipper, but no one was found guilty of any wrongdoing. The manager of the concession was cleared of manslaughter in 1973. He was defended by George Carmen.
Hilary Wynter
Warninglid, West Sussex

SCOTTISH
MORTGAGE
INVESTMENT
TRUST
We invest in profound change, disruptive technologies and big ideas.
Not just the stock market.
We don't see Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust as simply trading stocks on the world's markets. We see our role as seeking out those genuinely innovative businesses that are shaping the future. We call it investing in progress. And by using our skills as actual investors, not simply stock traders, we believe we can deliver strong returns for your portfolio.
Please remember that changing stock market conditions and currency exchange rates will affect the value of the investment in the fund and any income from it. Investors may not get back the amount invested.
Find out more by watching our film at scottishmortgageit.com
A Key Information Document is available. Call 0800 917 2112.
BAILLIE GIFFORD
Actual Investors

Your call may be recorded for training or monitoring purposes. Issued and approved by Baillie Gifford & Co Limited, whose registered address is at Calton Square, 1 Greenside Row, Edinburgh, EH1 3AN, United Kingdom. Baillie Gifford & Co Limited is the authorised Alternative Investment Fund Manager and Company Secretary of the Trust. Baillie Gifford & Co Limited is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. The investment trusts managed by Baillie Gifford & Co Limited are listed UK companies and are not authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

Memo to Elon Musk: Tesla matters more for civilisation than Twitter

I spent Easter agonising over whether to throw the considerable weight of this column behind Elon Musk's maverick $43 billion bid for Twitter. One thing I didn't do, however, was consult the multitude of opinions on the matter available via Twitter itself, because I'm afraid I regard it as a satanic cacophony of misinformation and vanity. If that puts me in the position of the late-15th-century scholar who said 'Printing presses? Pah! The only news I trust is handwritten by monks', so be it. But when I read Musk's claim that 'civilisational risk' would be decreased by his sole ownership of the ubiquitous microblogging site, I laughed out loud.

Not that I think Musk a fool. On the contrary, his leadership of Tesla since he bought into the fledgling electric car company in 2004 really has contributed to civilisation, in the sense that it has pioneered the global automotive industry's post-carbon transition. And despite a notably loose grasp of corporate governance and an extraordinarily lucky ride on a tech-crazy stock market, he's a pretty shrewd financier.

But he's also, frankly, a bit bonkers: obsessed with dreams of building cities on Mars; prone to public weed-smoking and strangely inarticulate interviews; deluded, we might suspect, by the adulation of a vast army of online admirers. His Twitter bid may not even be serious: there's no indication how he'd finance it, the market hasn't embraced it – and neither, in conclusion, will this column. Keep your wandering focus firmly on Tesla, Mr Musk.

Virtuoso investor

The contrarian New York investor John Paulson will go down in history as one of the monsters of the 2008 financial crisis, having earned $4 billion out of others' folly by betting that the US mortgage-backed securities market would implode. His fortunes since then have been more mixed. But he did one good thing for the world in 2013 when he bought – for half a billion dollars, outbidding the private equity firm Kohlberg – the Steinway piano company, whose concert grands, built in Hamburg and the New York borough of Queens, have been favoured by virtuosi from Rachmaninoff to Brendel and are unmatched in craftsmanship by any Chinese rip-off factory: even Lang Lang prefers Steinways.

Founded by a German immigrant in 1853, Steinway passed out of family ownership and was listed on the New York stock exchange before Paulson took it private again. His investment came with a sentimental spin – his sisters were pianists and his Ecuadorian-born father could not afford a Steinway for them – but also with his characteristic nose for value. In 2018 there were rumours he might sell to Poly Group, a Chinese conglomerate with military links; he didn't, but now he's planning to refloat the company with a billion-plus valuation while retaining control and taking the game to China by exploiting Steinway's luxury-brand status to sell lots more pianos there: contrarian thinking in a more admirable form.

City princelings

My starting salary as a graduate trainee at a posh merchant bank in 1976 was £2,800 a year, equivalent to three-quarters of average male pay at that time and to £22,000 in today's money. This year, I read, entry-level bankers can expect £63,000 before bonuses, which is double average UK pay and makes them three times more valued than I was. In another part of the City, newly qualified solicitors (usually two years out of university) in 'magic circle' law firms such as Freshfields are offered up to £125,000, likewise a multiple of previous generations' rewards.

From airlines to abattoirs, every corner of the employment market is afflicted by shortages of labour, skilled or unskilled. It's surely to the good of the UK economy, in which financial and professional services count for so much, that City employers are paying up for talent that might otherwise go elsewhere. This scramble to attract the best is, after all, a reflection of the confidence of the firms concerned, and we might also see it as a welcome turnaround from post-2008, when private-sector graduate recruitment withered and many bright youngsters fell back on civil service drudgery, precarious start-ups or barista work. Now the pendulum of capitalism has swung and – as real incomes beyond the City shrink under an onslaught of inflation and tax – these pampered princelings and princesses may prefer another autumn and winter of working from home, rather than running a gauntlet of furious protestors outside their marbled office-palaces.

Bookshop resistance

Senior departures at Blackwell's, the Oxford-based bookshop chain that includes Heffers of Cambridge, follow its takeover in late February by Waterstones – which already has Foyles, Hatchards and numerous other acquisitions under its belt, with the backing of a deep-pocketed investor called Elliott Advisers, and is run by James Daunt, who has six eponymous bookshops of his own. That might look like over-consolidation were it not for the relentless advance of Amazon, deploying ultra-low overheads and shameless tax policies to lay waste to the brave resistance of physical bookselling.

Online sales now account for more than half the UK book market, but Waterstones' fightback – with 1,000 independent sellers in support – continues to remind us of the pleasure of handling printed works before buying. Now the pandemic 'streaming boom' is over (UK households reportedly cancelled 1.5 million video subscriptions in the first quarter) and the cost of living is rocketing, we've all got more time for reading and less cash for going out; a good book is surely a better use for a tenner that barely buys you a gin and tonic. Just don't fall into the customer habit that so irritated the shop owner Shaun Bythell of Wigtown in Scotland, in his charming *Diary of a Bookseller*, of browsing at length, then ordering the chosen book cheaper from Amazon on your phone before you've even left the premises.

COURTESY OF THE EVERETT COLLECTION/ ALAMY

Nancy Cunard, photographed by Man Ray

BOOKS

Muse and monster

Nancy Cunard's defiance of convention began early, fuelled by bitter resentment towards her mother, says *Jane Ridley*

Five Love Affairs and a Friendship: The Paris Life of Nancy Cunard, Icon of the Jazz Age
by Anne de Courcy
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £25, pp. 336

The title of Anne de Courcy's riveting new book might give the impression that Nancy Cunard had no more than five lovers. In fact she had many, many more.

Born in 1896, Nancy was the only child of fantastically ill-matched parents. Her mother, Maud – she later changed her name to Emerald – was an American heiress and socialite. Her father, Sir Bache Cunard, was a fox-hunting squire busily engaged in spending the fortune he inherited as the grandson of the founder of the shipping line. Maud neglected Nancy, leaving her in the charge of an odious governess. The only person who had any time for the lonely little girl was the writer George Moore, her mother's lover. Some said he was Nancy's father, but this seems unlikely. He was Nancy's faithful friend, for whom she had a lifelong affection – the friendship of the book's title.

When Nancy was 11 her mother fell in love with the conductor Sir Thomas Beecham and left Sir Bache to move to London, where she embarked on an ambitious career as a leading society hostess. Nancy was sent to Miss Wolff's school in South Audley Street, and then 'finished' in Munich, Paris and Venice. She made friends with the children of the Souls and was seen everywhere with Lady Diana Manners (later Cooper). As de Courcy points out, the two girls loved to shock, but there was a difference between them. Diana flouted convention in order to attract attention; for Nancy, the revolt went deeper, fuelled by a simmering resentment against her moth-

er and all that the Edwardian generation stood for.

To escape Maud's control, Nancy made a hasty wartime marriage to a cricket-playing army officer named Sydney Fairbairn who had been wounded at Gallipoli. They had nothing in common and the marriage predictably failed. Fleeing her mother, Nancy left London for Paris in 1920. Aged 24, she had shingled straw-blonde hair, kohl-lined eyes and a crimson mouth. She smoked in public, drank continually and went to bed at 5 a.m. The first love affair of de Courcy's five was with Michael Arlen, who based the heroine of his 1924 bestseller *The Green Hat* on her.

Aged 24, Nancy had a hysterectomy, caused by complications from a previous operation. It wasn't what she wished, but far from ruining her life it proved a liberation. It meant that sex was one thing and love quite another. She had a seemingly insatiable appetite for sex – I didn't count the number of men in this book she is supposed to have slept with. For Nancy, writes de Courcy, sex was 'an itch to be scratched'.

Affair number three was with Aldous Huxley, for whom she acted as a muse, as she had with Arlen. So obsessed was Huxley with Nancy that his wife gave him an ultimatum, telling him she would leave the country the following day with or without him. He went with her. The next book he wrote, *Antic Hay*, has echoes of Nancy in its heroine, though she did not reciprocate his passion, remarking that being made love to by Huxley was 'like having slugs crawl all over you'. She was, however, besotted with Ezra Pound (lover number two), writing pencilled notes summoning him to come to her, failing to realise that her demands imposed an impossible strain on his marriage. Pound championed T.S. Eliot's poetry, which Nancy also admired, and she seems to have seduced Eliot too – the sole fling of his career.

De Courcy conveys vividly the Paris of the 1920s – the narrow, dark streets, the cheap restaurants, the dosshouses without lavatories. Café society was a world of aimless drifting and drinking, and Nancy was never quite sober. This was the background to affair number four, with the Surrealist writer Louis Aragon. Nancy took him to the farmhouse in Normandy which she bought to get away from the American alcohol tourists who crowded Montparnasse escaping Prohibition.

By now she was something of a monster – a selfish sexual tyrant with a habit of going off with a good friend of her current lover and hoping that neither man would realise she was two-timing them. She was violent too. Covered from wrist to elbow with African ivory bracelets, she would hit her lover with a braceleted arm when she was drunk, inflicting painful injuries.

In 1928 she fell in love with the man who changed her life – Henry Crowder, a black American pianist whom she spotted playing in a hotel in Venice. 'I was infatuated beyond all reason,' she wrote. Devastated by her betrayal, Aragon tried to commit suicide.

The affair with Crowder was a step too far for Emerald Cunard. At one of her grand lunch parties, Margot Asquith said

When drunk she would hit her lover with her braceleted arm, inflicting painful injuries

in a loud voice, regarding Nancy: 'What is it now, Maud? Drink, drugs or n—s?' With this remark, Emerald was forced to confront her daughter's relationship with Crowder. Nancy stuck the knife in with her polemic *Black Man and White Ladyship*, a vicious attack on Emerald, mocking her as vain and snobbish. She never saw her mother again, though Emerald continued to send her money.

In spite of the red wine and her exhausting sex life, Nancy was a significant cultural figure. In 1928 she installed a printing press at her farm in Normandy, and here she hand-printed small runs of short books and poetry written by her friends. The Hours Press was a successful business, especially after it moved to Paris. Samuel Beckett, a discovery of Nancy's, was first published by it.

The project that mattered most to her was her anthology of African and African-American culture, titled – unfortunately to modern ears – *Negro*. Her long-term interest in African culture and artefacts expanded into a 'socio-economic credo' of racial equality. As de Courcy says in her enjoyable, deftly written book, it is hard to find a label for this remarkable woman. Selfish lover, alcoholic, campaigner – they all fit.

Soul Singer

Can you hear me singing?
I have a high, clear voice
like that of Percy Sledge.
I'm a soul singer
from somewhere like Macon, Georgia.

I perform mostly
country soul numbers
in the Music Shoals style –
Percy's 'Out of Left Field',
'You've Got My Mind Messed Up' by James Carr.

I'm not a demonstrative singer.
I don't believe in going down on one knee
like Arthur Alexander,
or asking members of the audience
to come up on stage with me.

I stand still most of the time
and let the words do the talking.
'Sugar-plum dancing on my mind,
every day you whip me
seems like Valentine...'

I might throw out an arm if the mood takes me,
or place one hand on my heart.
I might close my eyes for a moment
as I take hold of the microphone.
Can you hear me singing?

— Hugo Williams

Accentuate the negative

David Sexton

Interventions
by Michel Houellebecq,
translated by Andrew Brown
Polity, £20, pp. 274

For many years, Michel Houellebecq was patronised by the French literary establishment as an upstart, what with his background in agronomy rather than literature, his miserable demeanour, his predilection for science fiction and his gift for unyieldingly saying the unsayable, especially about relations between the sexes.

That's all changed now. He won the Prix Goncourt in 2010 for *The Map and the Territory* and in 2019 was elevated to the Légion d'Honneur. The Nobel cannot be long delayed, the committee after all having honoured the equally ornery V.S. Naipaul and J.M. Coetzee.

Houellebecq's new novel *Anéantir*, published in January in a luxury edition of 300,000 copies, was a quasi-official event in France, heralded by a reverential two-part interview in *Le Monde* in which he confided that he was a bit of an alcoholic and quite the tart, since he wrote not for money or applause but to be loved.

Some 736 pages long, *Anéantir* begins as almost a spy thriller, set around the upcoming election, but then morphs into a study of the treatment of the old and helpless, followed by a harrowing account of fatal illness, alleviated only by the return of conjugal love to a couple long estranged. Houellebecq being Houellebecq, it is specified that the dying man enjoys a dreamy blowjob lasting three hours – but the novel is otherwise chaste and grave, Houellebecq signing off by saying it is time he stopped (as a novelist at least).

Yet although widely translated in Europe already, no English version seems yet to be scheduled. That's a pity, not only because it will appear after the period in which it is set, but it was the enthusiasm of English-language readers that did much to compel French critics to acknowledge that Houellebecq was, whether they liked it or not, their writer with most impact internationally. (In these pages, Anita Brookner regularly reviewed the novels as they appeared in French, aghast but fascinated by his sexual focus. She gets a sarky nod in the new one.)

Instead, here at least is a translation of Houellebecq's latest selection of his occasional essays, reviews and interviews, which he has published in three steadily expanding versions since 1998, running from a scathing early takedown, 'Jacques Prévert is a jerk', from 1992, to reflections on the impact of Covid-19, from May 2020. Even in lockdown, Houellebecq was not much impressed by the pandemic, calling it 'both scary and boring':

> A banal virus, unglamorously related to obscure influenza viruses, with poorly understood survival conditions and unclear characteristics, sometimes benign, sometimes fatal, not even sexually transmitted: in short, a virus without qualities.

He predicted that it would change nothing, just accelerate existing trends that decrease our material and human contacts and make the way we devalue the lives of the elderly even more shameless. 'We won't wake up, after lockdown, in a new world; it will be the same world, but a bit worse.' Accordingly, he never refers to it once in the new novel.

Throughout he adheres to Schopenhauer's dictum that 'the first – and practically the only – condition of good style is having something to say'. And he does: that 'the universe is based on separation, suffering and evil' and that the task of the writer is to describe this state of affairs unsparingly,

Even in lockdown, Houellebecq is unimpressed by the Covid pandemic, calling it 'both scary and boring'

before perhaps moving beyond it. Writing, he tells his academic acolyte Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, 'involves taking upon oneself the negative, all the negative in the world, and depicting it, so that the reader can be relieved by having seen this negative part expressed'.

So there are remote, derisive accounts of such matters as the lives of the Germans, the hopelessness of Calais, the power of advertising and the shelving function of modern architecture. Pro-prostitution, anti-euthanasia, he doesn't think much of any schemes of improvement. He's no fan of Europe: 'We have neither a common language, nor common values, nor common interests: in short, Europe doesn't exist.' He tells us feminists may be amiable dimwits, harmless in principle, but that their lack of lucidity is dangerous:

> The immense process of domestication, accomplished by women over the previous millennia in order to suppress a man's primitive inclinations (violence, fucking, drunkenness, play) and to make him a creature more or less able to lead a social life, has been reduced to nothing in the space of a generation.

To set against this there are lovely tributes to Neil Young (a voice 'from far, far away in the soul') and the novelist Emmanuel Carrère (for his moral clarity). Houellebecq speaks movingly of his love of reading from his earliest days, knowing it will last, perhaps even beyond smoking and sex. In a weird, memorable piece, 'I Have a Dream', he envisages a paradise of living happily forever, in a beautiful cave, as a hermaphrodite, with four legs, so even when he drinks too much he won't be afraid of falling over. But he ends by saying there's no harmony in the universe, nowhere he feels at home.

What he does believe in, he says, is love, 'the only good thing we have, better than a fitness programme, better than sport'. He explicitly rejects all hierarchical differentiations save that of kindness. Three times he cites Dostoevsky's rule that 'everyone who promotes generous and general ideas should be asked to make one particular person happy'. The Houellebecq this collection reveals is far from the depressive slut with an odd knack for prophecy that he is still eagerly reported to be in the British press.

Andrew Brown's translation is sparky but there's no introduction and minimal annotation, to make the book seem as current as possible. Good to have, but much of Houellebecq's most revealing non-fiction prose – the initial manifesto *Rester Vivant*, the 2005 journal *Mourir* – remains unavailable in English. Dozy publishers we have.

A catalogue of invented tongues

Houman Barekat

Imaginary Languages: Myths, Utopias, Fantasies, Illusions and Linguistic Fictions
by Marina Yaguello,
translated by Eric Butler
MIT, £25, pp. 352

The comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, in his stage persona as the dim-witted interviewer Ali G, once asked Noam Chomsky if a person could simply invent a new language from scratch. The renowned linguist gave him short shrift: 'You can do it if you like and nobody would pay the slightest attention to you because it would just be a waste of time.' Throughout history, however, a motley array of eccentrics has done just this, and received a fair bit of attention.

Originally published in 1984 but only now translated into English, Marina Yaguello's fascinating survey of constructed languages revisits the history of two distinct but interlinked – and equally fanciful – intel-

GETTY IMAGES

'Joyfully the hope caresses us, because the future goal becomes apparent, that the international language progresses, finding friends everywhere'

lectual projects: the attempt to retrace the origins of all world languages to a single primordial tongue; and the dream of constructing a universal language that would eventually supplant all others.

You don't have to be mentally disturbed to invent a language, but it helps: glossomaniacs, paranoiacs and megalomaniacs are well represented in this pantheon. Yaguello's archetypal innovator is a tragicomic obsessive reminiscent of Edward Casaubon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*:

> We can picture the logophile in a study crammed with books; all around lie vast quantities of information yet to be collated, classified, listed and indexed on countless tables and cards. A delirium of naming, taxonomical madness, has seized this solitary figure…

Cranks and fantasists abound. The 12th-century abbess Hildegard of Bingen, inventor of the earliest known artificial language, *lingua ignota*, claimed it came to her in a divine vision. One of several amusing tidbits in *Imaginary Languages* involves the 19th-century Swiss medium Hélène Smith, who purported to communicate with Martians during her seances. When it was pointed out that the grammatical and syntactic structures of her 'Martian' were uncannily similar to those of French, she went away and composed another extraterrestrial tongue, which she called 'Ultra-Martian'. Its lexicon was more clipped and its syntax deliberately mangled so as not to resemble French.

These endeavours took on a political dimension in the modern era. Utopians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – among them L.L. Zamenhof, the inventor of Esperanto – believed a universal language could usher in a new age of international peace and brotherhood. Two world wars, and the rise of English to something like a global *lingua franca*, put paid to such hopes. The chimera of a universal language could also be enlisted for reactionary ends, as demonstrated by the career of the Georgian-born Soviet philologist Nikolai Marr. He peddled a vulgar Marxist theory that language is a superstructure mirroring society's economic base, and the unification of different languages into a single tongue is the logical endpoint of national development. Though discredited by fellow linguists, his ideas were endorsed by Stalin in the 1930s to lend intellectual legitimacy to his imperialist Russification agenda.

Some very fine imaginary languages are to be found in works of fiction. The people in Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516) speak a blend

The medium Hélène Smith claimed to communicate with Martians – in a language uncannily like French

of Greek and Persian called – imaginatively – Utopian; in Francis Godwin's *Man in the Moone* (1638), a lunar-dwelling population communicate via a musical language in which each utterance forms a melody; in Alexander Bogdanov's *Red Star* (1908), all the inhabitants of Mars speak the same Martian tongue; the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien feature fictional dialects inspired by Anglo-Saxon; the Newspeak in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) is probably the best known fictional example of a 'philosophical language' – one specifically designed to demarcate the boundaries of acceptable thought.

Yaguello, a professor of linguistics at the University of Paris VII, notes a crucial flaw in many invented languages. The hermetic neatness to which their creators aspire – seeking to marry 'harmony, eloquence, straightforwardness, logic, clarity of reference, musicality, symmetry, regularity and economy' – contrasts markedly with the messy reality of natural tongues. She highlights the excessive schematism of Volapük, a would-be universal language devised by a German Catholic priest in 1879, which 'contains moods not often found in world languages – for example, the operative and dubitative'. It's no coincidence that the most enduring constructed language, Esperanto, is also among the least rigid; the fact that it has spawned a number of variants is 'a sign of vitality'.

If the desire to engineer new languages originated in a certain innate drive – a neurotic impulse to arrange, codify and control that resides in all of us to a greater or lesser extent – it is in the nature of language to resist such limitations. Flexibility and mutability are essential; flux is a feature, not a bug. 'A universal language,' writes Yaguello, 'is as impossible as perpetual motion.' But when did futility ever get in the way of a good idea? The catalogue of invented tongues is more than just a cultural curio: it's a monument, really, to the hubristic folly of human intelligence.

The great divide
Madeleine Feeny

Trespasses
by Louise Kennedy
Bloomsbury, £14.99, pp. 220

Kenneth Branagh's Oscar-winning recent film *Belfast* chronicles the travails of a Protestant family amid sectarian conflict in 1969. Louise Kennedy's much hyped first novel, set outside Belfast in 1975, explores the same tensions from a different perspective. Like her protagonist Cushla, Kennedy's Catholic family owned a pub in a Protestant-majority town, and *Trespasses* captures how it feels to be outnumbered and under scrutiny.

Kennedy's career is enough to inspire anyone. A chef for 30 years, she only began writing at 47, but her ascent since is far from typical: nine publishers fought over her debut short story collection *The End of the World is a Cul de Sac* and she has twice been shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Audible Short Story Award. In lockdown, her straight-talking tweets went viral, and *Trespasses* crackles with the same blunt humour.

We meet Cushla, aged 24, teaching seven-year-olds at a Catholic primary school (and fending off Father Slattery's fire-and-brimstone interventions) while trying to limit her mother's gin consumption and pulling pints

Magda, the former wife of the Nazi industrialist Günther Quandt, marries Joseph Goebbels, accompanied by her son Harald. After the war, Harald and his half-brother Herbert used the Quandt fortune to rescue BMW from bankruptcy, making Herbert's daughter the richest woman in Germany today

GETTY IMAGES

at the pub her brother inherited from their recently deceased father. There she meets Michael Agnew, an older, married Protestant barrister, known to 'charm the knickers off you', and tumbles headlong into an affair. Meanwhile, at school, she's moved by the plight of the class pariah Davy McGeown, and when his father is beaten nearly to death decides to help the beleaguered family, the only Catholics living on a rough estate.

What elevates a familiar tale of forbidden love across faith and class barriers is the interplay between Cushla's private relationships, her professional actions and the political context. The vivid, propulsive narrative is punctuated by grim headlines, often recited by her pupils, who are fluent in the vocabulary of war. Slow news days don't exist, and the book gathers a deathly momentum as it hurtles towards its shocking climax.

In quick-witted Cushla, Kennedy has created a compelling protagonist who keenly feels the humiliations of being a philanderer's 'bit on the side', yet can't resist the affair's precarious, tunnel-vision intensity. The scenes involving children avoid the tweeness that blighted *Belfast* and show how Catholic youth, marginalised and deprived of opportunity, became vulnerable to radicalisation.

This cleverly crafted love story about ordinary lives ravaged by violence tears at your heart without succumbing to sentimentality. It reveals the bleak consequences of crossing invisible lines in a fractured community, even with the best intentions.

The money behind the Third Reich

Katja Hoyer

Nazi Billionaires: The Dark History of Germany's Wealthiest Dynasties
by David de Jong
William Collins, £25, pp. 400

It was a clear cold morning in January 1936 when Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler arrived at the luxurious Regina Palast Hotel in central Munich. He had come to pick up a group of businessmen for a day trip. Their destination: Dachau concentration camp.

Nazi Germany's first official camp had been set up by Himmler in March 1933 to detain the new regime's political enemies. It became the prototype on which other camps were modelled. Himmler's wealthy guests were given a personal tour by the SS leader and were impressed. Their host was 'very carefully prepared and dressed up', one of them commented afterwards.

As the party walked through Dachau, they were shown uniformed inmates in workshops – forced labourers such as tailors, carpenters and cobblers. The businessmen then tasted the food in the camp kitchens before taking a look round the punishment block. After lunching in the canteen they departed to visit a nearby porcelain factory, also run by the SS, before returning to Munich for a lavish dinner.

Impressed by what they perceived to be an orderly system of prison labour, the businessmen agreed to join the Freundeskreis Himmler, an elite group which provided the SS with money outside its regular budget, for 'cultural tasks', as Himmler put it. In total, the organisation received around one million marks a year to fund its eugenicist programmes.

In exchange, the SS donors gained access to an exclusive social circle that met every other Wednesday at the Aero Club in Berlin, opposite Himmler's HQ. The company included such industry giants as Friedrich Flick, who had amassed a fortune during the first world war and the Weimar Republic, Rudolf Bingel, CEO of Siemens-Schuckert, and Richard Kaselowsky, CEO of the baking company Dr Oetker.

These and other 'Nazi billionaires' are the subject of the *Bloomberg News* journalist David de Jong's new book, which sets out to investigate 'the dark history of Germany's wealthiest dynasties'. As a German-speaking historian, I have to admit that I was sceptical about the prospect of another book on this subject. There has been a vast amount of recent research into the role businesses played in allowing Hitler to come to power and inflict terrible suffering on Europe through war and genocide.

Some cases are obvious examples of culpability. When I read history at the University of Jena in Thuringia, the department helped investigate the nearby, by then defunct, company Topf and Sons, which

produced crematoria and ventilation systems for the gas chambers at Auschwitz. It was an important if disturbing project that resulted in the establishing of an education centre. Such efforts by families or businesses who sponsor research are now fairly commonplace. Other financial pillars of the Nazi regime with more familiar names such as Daimler-Benz, Allianz and Deutsche Bank have commissioned historians to investigate their past.

But de Jong brings much to the table. As he points out, many German business dynasties are still keen to 'sidestep a complete reckoning with the dark history that stains their fortunes'. A recent example is the young heiress of a biscuit empire. Verena Bahlsen claimed in 2019 that her company had nothing to be ashamed of, as during the Nazi years 'we paid forced labourers the same as Germans and treated them well'. A scandal erupted, and investigations have since found that the mostly female deportees from Poland and Ukraine who were forced to work in her family's biscuit factory in Hanover received only a quarter of regular pay.

As well as reminding us of the continuing ignorance and wilful denial of some German tycoons, de Jong also points out that there is not much accessible work on this topic in the Anglosphere. *Nazi Billionaires* takes English-speaking audiences into the murky world of Hitler's financiers, and the author cleverly weaves his astonishing facts and figures into human stories.

Following five influential clans, the book shows in detail how greed, ideology and individual motivation led to the entanglement of business and politics that allowed the Nazis to flourish. The Quandts were a prime example. Their patriarch Günther's much younger second wife Magda divorced him to marry the Nazi propaganda chief Joseph Goebbels. Her son Harald, from her marriage to Quandt, would be the only one of her seven children to survive beyond 1945. He and his half-brother Herbert went on to invest their father's money in BMW after the war, thereby rescuing the company from bankruptcy. Herbert's children still profit from this, as they own half the shares. His daughter, Susanne Klatten, is the richest woman in Germany today.

'We paid forced labourers the same as Germans and treated them well,' Verena Bahlsen claimed in 2019

Its fascinating detail and engaging style make *Nazi Billionaires* a forceful book, revealing to a wide audience a vital aspect of Germany's ongoing discussion with itself.

Be a self-sacrificing ant

Stuart Jeffries

Ways of Being: Beyond Human Intelligence
by James Bridle
Allen Lane, £20, pp. 363

One day the writer and artist James Bridle rented a hatchback, taped a smartphone to the steering wheel and installed some webcams in order to make his own self-driving car. Armed with software cut-and-pasted from the internet, his aim was to collaborate with the AI he'd thus devised and travel to Mount Parnassus, sacred to Dionysus and home of the Muses, 'to be elevated to the peak of knowledge, craft and skill'. Just try telling that to the traffic cops.

This batty project had a serious point. Bridle wanted to subvert the idea that we cede control to our dismal robot overlords every time we plug co-ordinates into the GPS. To that end, he went about training the car, which he had rigged up with what amounted to a neural network that functioned like a simplified brain. The car learned from visual cues that, say, the lines on a road are painted to ensure vehicles don't cross them and become crash statistics.

'I wanted to understand AI better,' Bridle

Master's and PhD research in
MODERN WAR STUDIES

Based in central London, this one-year Master's (and related three-year PhD) in Modern War Studies offers the opportunity to pursue research in a wide range of topics in the period from the Second World War to the present.

Options include military policy, military history since 1945, fighting effectiveness, the increasing relevance of cyber warfare, the armed forces and the public, and the rapidly changing character of war - among many.

Expert one-to-one supervision is combined with a distinguished series of evening seminars (each followed by dinner) at the Army & Navy Club in Pall Mall, and an intensive Research Day at the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst.

Scholarships are available, as well as reduced rates for current members of the armed forces.

For further details, email lin.robinson@buckingham.ac.uk

THE UNIVERSITY OF BUCKINGHAM

GRADUATE PROGRAMMES IN LONDON

writes. 'I wanted to have the experience of collaborating with an intelligent machine.' This is the theme of his book: we must rethink what it means to be intelligent in a spirit of collaboration with non-humans. Alan Turing's 1950 paper *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* suggested a computer was intelligent if it could engage a human in conversation – which is, apart from anything else, offensive to gorillas and, quite possibly, slime. Bridle introduces us to alternative intelligences such as the octopus, which, so far as I understand it, thinks with its tentacles as much as its brain. He also celebrates the wood wide web – the means by which trees form a mycorrhizal network to pass signals via fungal threads, thereby sharing resources and warning peers about incoming threats.

David Attenborough argued on the same lines in his recent *Green Planet* series, suggesting that plants are far from stationary and

We should all become Doctor Dolittles, attending mindfully to the wisdom of animals

silent: rather, they might be conceived of as members of chatty mutual aid societies, from which we would do well to learn if we are to survive climate change.

These are not new thoughts. Prince Pyotr Kropotkin, the 19th-century Russian anarchist and naturalist, introduced the term 'mutual aid' to describe what we, thinking inside the Darwinian evolutionary paradigm, have missed. Kropotkin wasn't saying that *On the Origin of Species* was specious; rather, that while flora and fauna are certainly red in tooth, claw and thorn, 'there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid and mutual defence'.

Humans have long sought to distinguish themselves from nature, while neo-liberal economic theory, Bridle submits, posits we are discrete individuals bent on personal utility maximisation and are jerked around by selfish genes bent, if Richard Dawkins was right, on their own survival. Recently, the anthropologist Bruno Latour, in his book *Down to Earth,* argued that we should learn from termites. Even though they live in mounds made from masticated earth and fecal matter, they don't lay waste to the Earth, nor are any of them insect Elon Musks, seeking to jet off to another planet having ruined this one. Rather, their default position is of conservation and cooperation.

For Bridle, the point is we should become Doctor Dolittles, not so much talking to the animals as attending mindfully to their wisdom and emulating non-humans' stirring capacity for co-operation and selflessness. Think dancing bees and self-sacrificing ants. We must embrace what he calls the more-than-human-world.

What makes his book new and interesting is its insistence that AI, rightly used, can help in this project. But there is a problem. Computers have been fast-tracking humanity down the wrong path. He writes:

> One of the great misunderstandings of the 20th century, which persists into the present, was that everything is a decision problem. The appearance of computers was so wondrous and their abilities so powerful that it convinced us that the universe is a like a computer, the brain is like a computer, that we and plants and animals are like computers.

As a result, we believe that the world can be broken down into data chunks that are fed into computers to produce concrete answers that we can act on with moral impunity and logical irrefutability.

That is nonsense, says Bridle; and from this error flows all kinds of violence. We reduce the world's beauty to numbers and degrade, erase, torture and kill those things and beings that do not fit in with that world view. *Ways of Being* begins with a furious denunciation of recent use of AI to search for oil beneath the mountains and forests of Epirus in northern Greece:

> What sort of intelligence participates in the drilling, draining and despoliation of the few remaining wildernesses left on Earth, in the name of progress we already know to be doomed? This is not an intelligence I recognise.

Can AI be a force for good? Bridle introduces the term 'internet of animals', which apparently signifies how we might use data culled from GPS sensors on birds and antelopes to tap into their wisdom about climatic and other changes. This is the kind of symbiosis between humans, the natural world and AI he champions.

If all this sounds rather pious, happily Bridle goes off message. Before returning his rental, he parked up on waste ground beneath Mount Parnassus, poured salt around the self-driving car in a broken circle meant to project the road markings symbolising 'No Entry' inwards. The car, having learned that crossing these markings was not only contrary to the highway code but suicide, was stuck, like Brünnhilde in her fiery circle.

Bridle's video of what he called 'The Autonomous Trap' went viral. Of course it did: we love tales of machines confounded, robots busted down to size and algorithms undone by rebellious humans. It may not be intelligence as we know it, but it is human, all too human.

That way madness lies

Bart Van Es

Mad About Shakespeare: From Classroom to Theatre to Emergency Room
by Jonathan Bate
William Collins, £25, pp. 320

There is a trend for books in which academics write personally about their engagement with literature. Examples include Lara Feigel's *Free Woman*, in which the author blends a memoir of her marriage break-up with a close reading of Doris Lessing's fiction, and Sally Bayley's *Girl With Dove*, which fuses an account of a traumatic childhood with sketches that focus on Bayley's early love of books. Addressed to a wider readership, these works combine autobiography with literary criticism. They are carefully crafted, confessional and ask why literature matters. The advantage of this approach is that it avoids the pitfalls of the now highly

sculptures of Ancient Rome

How many nights now and my desire is a bronze hare – as heavy in me and as light – molten creature cast on the point of flight, elements holding their form for two thousand years and more – although the patina is changing, reflections change under different lights. Every day this spring, walking in the fields, I have heard skylarks and seen a hare crouch as still as this bronze hare in the grass, watching me – our astonished looking a concord between us – and bird song and mammal stillness seemed strung together on a taut wire – and when the hare sprang at last, how wild alive, how fast it flew!

— Nancy Campbell

BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

Ian McKellen as King Lear in the RSC's 2007 production directed by Trevor Nunn

professional discipline of English Literature, dominated in universities by grant applications and rather narrow models of what counts as research. In place of professionalism, these are books about human beings and the specialness of art.

Mad About Shakespeare follows this trend. Jonathan Bate tells us he wanted to write a memoir about his life with Shakespeare and a book about the effect of mental illness on a series of writers he has loved, including Samuel Johnson, Edward Thomas, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath. The 'mad' of his title also hints at his mother's struggle with depression, an intermittent theme. Bate is the nation's most prominent Shakespeare scholar, the author of books such as *Shakespeare and Ovid* and *The Genius of Shakespeare*. This memoir tells us about his schooldays, his lifelong passion for the theatre and the key steps of his academic career. We see him in conversation with important figures in the acting world, including Ian McKellen, Simon Russell Beale and Judi Dench, especially on the topic of madness on stage.

The author is not, from the outset, an all-knowing scholar. The teenage Bate, opinionated and precocious, argues with his father about *Henry V*. Bate Senior, a second world war veteran and classics teacher, has a strong emotional attachment to the play's patriotic speeches, whereas his son, brought up on Wilfred Owen, sides with Falstaff and scoffs at notions of honour. Bate's recollection of these exchanges is touching, especially as they are shadowed by his father's early death, with such quarrels still unresolved, and by the cloud of his mother's depression. We see the richness of Shakespeare's *Henriad*, a trilogy capable of holding these competing readings by father and son.

The sketches of playing cricket, reading widely and travelling in the family Mini to various theatre productions present a picture of a childhood that was largely happy. That same pattern of success and literary passion continues as Bate moves to Cambridge and then Harvard, where he takes his first strides as a scholar. The intensity of his opening recollection of his father's death, however, only returns in the book's final pages. There, in an urgent present tense, he describes the way in which a holiday in the Mediterranean – 'happiness is here: your family, the sun, the few weeks of distance from the pressure of work' – suddenly turned to near tragedy when his five-year-old daughter lost consciousness and began to turn purple. The account is literally breathtaking. Spare description is intercut with fragments of quotation from Woolf, Martial, Julian of Norwich and Shakespeare, among others. At the end of the book we feel we have been on a journey.

The 'mad' of Bate's title also hints at his mother's struggle with depression, an intermittent theme of the book

The middle part of the memoir, in which Bate tells us about Dr Johnson's depression and the comparable struggles of Woolf, Thomas and Plath, presents a greater challenge when it comes to tone. Here the narrator is an established academic, highly knowledgeable about his subject and mixing with the great and the good. At one point, in response to a request from Prince Charles, Bate pens a quick defence of Shakespeare's authorship of the plays attributed to him.

We cannot blame him for his eminence, knighted for his services to English literature, but it is hard to see how in this section the element of autobiography helps with the literary criticism. In the earlier part of the book, where Bate deals with his mother's depression, personal experience casts light on Shakespeare's treatment of mental illness. By contrast, in the middle section, Bate's glamorous life and his subject matter are at variance.

The personal voice always comes with attendant risks. One short episode in an otherwise beautiful description of his daughter's health crisis illustrates this. Having rushed to intensive care, Bate finds that his car is illegally parked, crossing into an adjacent bay. There is a yellow ticket on the windscreen and he appeals to the traffic policeman, who tells him that 'in the circumstances, sir, I will re-sin this ticket'. This 'glorious malapropism of re-sin for rescind', Bate writes, makes the policeman a second Dogberry, the constable from *Much Ado About Nothing*, who is 'the most lovable of Shakespeare's clowns... who gets his words wrong but is the embodiment of innocence and kindness'. It is logical that someone whose mind runs on Shakespeare quotations should make that connection, but the voice here is too urbane and knowing at a moment of deep personal crisis. Perhaps the fusion of memoir and literary criticism works best when the author is vulnerable? The slight problem with *Mad About Shakespeare* is that Bate feels so comfortable, happy and sane.

GETTY IMAGES

Herbert Rowse Armstrong – 'a little man of the professional class living an intensely respectable life'

Thereby hangs a tale

Keith Miller

The Poisonous Solicitor: The True Story of a 1920s Murder Mystery
by Stephen Bates
Icon Books, £18.99, pp. 336

The case of the retired major Herbert Rowse Armstrong, a Hay-on-Wye solicitor hanged in 1922 for killing his wife Katharine with arsenic, is one of nine examined in George Orwell's 1946 *Tribune* essay 'The Decline of the English Murder' as having enthralled the public. 'A little man of the professional class', living an 'intensely respectable life', nevertheless, for reasons that appear somehow underpowered (in Armstrong's case a change to his wife's will and a romantic friendship, probably never consummated, with a woman he met in Bournemouth during the war), finds himself resorting to the bathroom cabinet or garden shed ('the means chosen should, of course, be poison') with heinous intent, and is only brought to justice after slipping up over some 'tiny, unforeseeable detail'.

From the account of Armstrong's trial, which takes up around half of Stephen Bates's book, it becomes abundantly clear that both the court case itself and the investigation which preceded it were conducted shockingly badly. The judge, Mr Justice Darling, was openly on the side of the prosecution. His career was drawing to a close, and it is suggested that he wanted to try the black cap on for size once more before hanging up his robes. Another Welsh solicitor had been acquitted of poisoning his wife a year or so before, and to let a second one go might have looked like carelessness. Eminent scientists handed down speculative and actively misleading pathological and toxicological testimony as if they were Moses returned from Sinai, and attempts to cross-examine them were stifled by the judge. Any hopes of appeal were stymied by the lawyers' ingrained reluctance to admit to a mistake, whether collectively or personally. Astonishingly, the attorney general, who had served as prosecuting counsel, also had the power to refuse an appeal to the House of Lords, which he duly did.

It is also worth pointing out that there was no direct evidence against Armstrong: a capital case was decided entirely on circumstantial evidence. His wife had been physically and mentally ill for some time, and was self-medicating with quack remedies; she had spoken, at least obliquely, about suicide. However, Armstrong did seem to have a lot of arsenic lying around the place for someone who merely had a bit of a dandelion problem. A fellow solicitor and a local tax official were both taken violently ill after enjoying his hospitality in the months after his wife's death. His marriage may have been unhappy – but then again, it may not. He may have had a girlfriend, or business worries, or syphilis – or not. His children spoke of him fondly; his sister-in-law critically. The only fair conclusion is to say that the jury is still out, or ought to be – cold comfort for Armstrong, to say nothing of his orphaned children, who were given new names in separate homes. All the same, he probably wasn't a man you would want to accept a buttered scone from.

Armstrong did seem to have a lot of arsenic lying around for someone with a bit of a dandelion problem

The Poisonous Solicitor isn't offered up as a fresh look at a cold case so much as a competent and assured essay in a hybrid genre one might call 'true cosy crime'. The evidence mounts up: the twee cover graphics, the brisk character sketches of larger-than-life jurists, an emphasis on small details which isn't so much a forensic reconstruction of events as a sustained campaign to inject colour into a bleak and comfortless tale. All this is done efficiently, though somewhat conventionally. Bates is disparaging about the lurid prose of the newspaper reporters covering the case, but at least one of them – Matthew Anderson of the *Manchester Guardian* – takes wing from the page rather more vigorously than Bates himself does.

The book's thesis – roughly that Armstrong was probably guilty, but the Crown failed to prove its case, and snapped his neck anyway – seems about right, but it's curiously anaemic in narrative terms: there's too much cuteness for any attempt at *saeva indignatio* to really catch light. A short chapter at the end, showing how some of the details of the case inspired the legion of cosy crime writers who were just revving up in the 1920s, sits queasily alongside the revelation that John Ellis, the hangman involved, tried to take his own life in 1924, and then, haunted and impoverished (as a freelancer, he received no pension from the Home Office), finally succeeded in 1932. The myopic view of society and childish sense of right and wrong you see in Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers doesn't quite fit when you're talking about real people. Meanwhile, earlier this month it was announced that Richard Osman, the TV quizmaster and author of two cosy bestsellers, was quitting his broadcasting career to concentrate on writing. Who says crime doesn't pay?

Memory test

Diana Hendry

The Candy House
by Jennifer Egan
Corsair, £20, pp. 334

On page 231 of *The Candy House*, a sequel – no, a 'sibling' says Jennifer Egan – to the Pulitzer prize-winning *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, we meet a character called Noreen. Wasn't she in *Goon Squad*? Quick check and yes, there she is playing a bit-part peeping through a fence. Now she's older, madder and still obsessed with the fence. It's hard to decide if it's an advantage to have read the previous novel, or if it just makes reading *The Candy House* like the sort of memory test that could mess with your head. This is unfortunate, since memory is key to its themes: the future of technology and the quest for authenticity.

A tech tycoon, Bix Bouton, has created 'Mandala', a revolutionary way of externalising your memory. 'Own Your Unconscious' allows you access to every memory you've ever had. And if you donate a chunk of memory to the Collective Unconscious you can tune in to everyone's unconscious. It's a horrible idea and the epigraph (Emily Dickinson: 'The Brain – is wider than the Sky') and the ending suggest Egan doesn't much like it either. Forget social media, Facebook and

Instagram – this is the end of the private life. Theoretically it's also the end of dementia, crime solving, dying languages and missing persons.

The Candy House is not so much a novel as a collection of exceptionally clever, sometimes funny short stories, told from every possible viewpoint – past and present, first person, third, in the form of tweets, emails, an instruction manual. The last, 'Lulu the Spy', was first published in the *New Yorker*. Who's Lulu? She first appears in *Goon Squad* as the little girl taken by her mother, the publicist Dolly, to meet a murderous dictator. Now she's Citizen Agent 3825 and is possibly bionic. In 'See Below', Lulu, Dolly and the dictator share a lengthy email thread in which they plan a documentary about the earlier *Goon Squad* story 'Selling the General'. Russian dolls come to mind. And literary incest.

Apart from the variety of viewpoints, the chronology of *The Candy House* is scrambled, its structure mysteriously incorporates electronic dance music (Build Break Drop Build) and the whole is a dizzying, disturbing mishmash of family saga, sci fi and literary high jinks. Nothing is explored in any depth. There are so many characters that it's hard to remember, let alone care for, any of them. Wikipedia provides a cast list for *Goon Squad*. It would have been kind if the publishers had done the same for *The Candy House*. Poor Bix, the techno magnet who began all this, ends up with his memory stored in a blue Consciousness Cube.

Damned either way

Tibor Fischer

The War on the West: How to Prevail in the Age of Unreason
by Douglas Murray
HarperCollins, £20, pp. 360

The War on the West is Douglas Murray's latest blast against loony left wokery, chiefly in the areas of race and 'social justice'. 'This is not like earlier wars,' he writes. 'It is a cultural war, and it is being waged remorselessly against all the roots of the western tradition and against everything good that the western tradition has produced.'

The meticulous, measured way that Murray presents his arguments and evidence suggests a man who knows he's in for a lot of flak. For instance, he has the audacity to suggest that the death of George Floyd, however brutal and inept the policing, doesn't actually bear any signs of racism. But he admits that some of the subjects of his examination can't be swayed by reason, for they have a foolproof defence:

> This logical trap is the same one favoured by witch-dunkers in the Middle Ages: if the woman drowns, she is innocent; if she floats, she is a witch and can be burned. In [Robin] DiAngelo's logic, the person who denies they are racist is racist and so is the person who says they are racist. Meaning that the best thing to do in any given situation is for a person to save time and confess to being a racist.

'Person' in this context of course means a white person. But the comparison is just. The apparent ubiquity of racism is a modern equivalent of witchcraft; it explains all evils and failings, and it's an effortless and damaging charge to cast on anyone you dislike or disagree with, or who disagrees with you.

'War' may not be the right word for what Murray describes. Civil war might be a more apt term, since the attacks come mostly from within. De Tocqueville identified the French Revolution as the moment when politics transformed into something like religion (or, if you prefer, the quest for heaven turned political), when it was no longer a question of changing a few details or a particular system but changing everything, the world. Faith envelops all fact. This utopian fervour tends to be accompanied by a sense of infallibility and a lack of compromise, and it's a strand that runs from Robespierre, through the Bolsheviks, to Islamic State and the Antifa nutters in Portland.

A creative writing student was worried by a story in which someone was served by 'an Italian waiter'

Murray points out that the West's competitors – China and the rich Arab states – still often get a better press in the West than the West does. Putin may be pariah-of-the-month because of his invasion of Ukraine, but the irony is that he's done nothing new. He's always been an unadulterated KGB thug, but previously he kept his tanks and missiles a decent distance from the lawns of German burghers. Most of the outrage that occurred in the western media about Chechnya was not about Putin's near genocide, but because the LGBT contingent came in for a kicking. China's near totalitarian system and bloody recent history are often overlooked or dismissed, Murray demonstrates, by celebrities and politicians who would cross the road to avoid someone whose great-great-grandfather might have had a plantation.

'When was the last time you cleared out that shed?'

Some of the material cited by Murray is perhaps a storm in a teacup – as in the case of the Tate's restaurant mural by Rex Whistler. You see you can't win: if you don't keep slavery in mind, you're wrong, and if you do depict slavery (supposedly as Whistler did), you're also wrong. Some is ridiculously funny: an American campus went on the alert because a member of the Ku Klux Klan had been spotted roaming. He turned out to be a Dominican monk.

The problem with the racism and invisible racism that's alleged is that some will believe it – and it all adds up. It's often forgotten (or indeed not known) that the Brixton riots of 1981 didn't happen as a result of police brutality but because a police officer was trying to help a black youth who had been stabbed, an act which was misinterpreted by a mob as discrimination.

You only have to look at Northern Ireland to see what happens when one side feels another has an advantage. Everyone is bending over backwards to collect perceived inequality. In the US, sensitivity around race and 'identity' has reached bizarre levels. I taught a creative writing course in Tampa some years ago, and one student was worried about a story which described someone as being served by 'an Italian waiter'. Wasn't that discriminatory?

The level of absurdity is now beyond the most inventive satire. You'd hope at least maths would be safe, but no: that's racist too. The worst offenders tend to be in the academic world, where they have benefited from what Antonio Gramsci called the 'war of position'. The left largely lost the argument in the economic sphere after Margaret Thatcher; hardly anyone wants central planning or five-year plans back, but the left retreated into the schools and universities, where they've done some serious damage.

In a delicious marriage of Nazi Germany and Stalinism, the British Library put the poet Ted Hughes on the naughty list of 'wealth obtained from enslaved people or through colonial violence' because an ancestor, who lived in Shakespeare's time, and from whom Hughes wasn't directly descended, was discovered to have been involved in the London Virginia Company. An apology was forthcoming. But you can see how it would be tempting for a bureaucrat to rise above being a mere shelf-stuffer of books to become a heroic anti-racist ninja for justice.

It's odd, then, that in the UK, where everything is purportedly so racist and even the tap water must be white supremacist, people of colour are still willing to risk their lives to get in, and airports aren't jammed with Jamaicans and Africans fleeing for sanctuary elsewhere. But it's unlikely that Murray's witty book will be read by those who really need to read it.

ARTS

Thrills, frills and folderols

A clever, original exhibition at the Wallace Collection has *Laura Freeman* twirling her way through the West End

Extensive research went into the writing of this piece. First, I lay on the sofa watching Disney's *Cinderella*. Then, *Beauty and the Beast*. Then, because I'm assiduous about these things, *Frozen*. The singalong version. I wish I could tell you that the sofa was a rococo number with ormolu mounts and a pink satin seat, but that would upholster the truth.

My excuse – who needs one? – was the Wallace Collection's delightful exhibition *Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Arts*. It's not often that I leave a show smiling, humming and near enough twirling my way through the West End. Bibbidi-bobbidi-boo.

What a clever and original exhibition this is: an ingenious pairing of the Wallace's 18th-century collections with rococo flourishes from Disney's classic films. It is a pendant to a larger show that has just finished at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Get the Met catalogue if you're craving more.

Walt Disney, born in Chicago in 1901, to a father of Irish and a mother of German and English descent, was fascinated by the 'Old Continent'. He first travelled to France in 1918, just after the end of the first world war, as a Red Cross ambulance driver. He returned to America the following year and began his artistic career in commercial illustration. By 1923, he had, with his brother Roy, set up the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio, later the Walt Disney Company. Five years on, he struck big with Mickey Mouse. When he arrived in London and Paris on a grand tour in 1935, Walt was a megastar. He visited the Palace of Versailles, where a family home video shows him wandering the park, Louis XIV's Hall of Mirrors and Marie Antoinette's private apartments. He began collecting what would become a library of more than 330 books on European art and architecture, and illustrated fairy tales, among them 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Beauty and the Beast'. He had a weakness, too, for kitschily romantic antiques. The rococo, the exuberant decorative style, all frills and folderols, that flourished in France and Germany in the 18th century became an enduring source of inspiration for Disney's animators.

Two early Disney shorts from the *Silly Symphony* series star porcelain figurines of the cupids-and-powdered-wigs type. In 'The Clock Store' (1931), a couple of Meissen-style china waltzers dance a courtly minuet from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, while in 'The China Shop' (1934) a pair of dancers dazzle the tankards and teapots with a pas de deux. There are clips from each in the show, but it's worth watching the full sequences on YouTube (not least to find out what happens when the china shop lady is abducted by a lusty satyr statuette). The transformation in animation in just three years is astonishing: from crackling black and white to wonderfully rendered colour. Look at how the light plays across porcelain skirts and frock coats in the later cartoon.

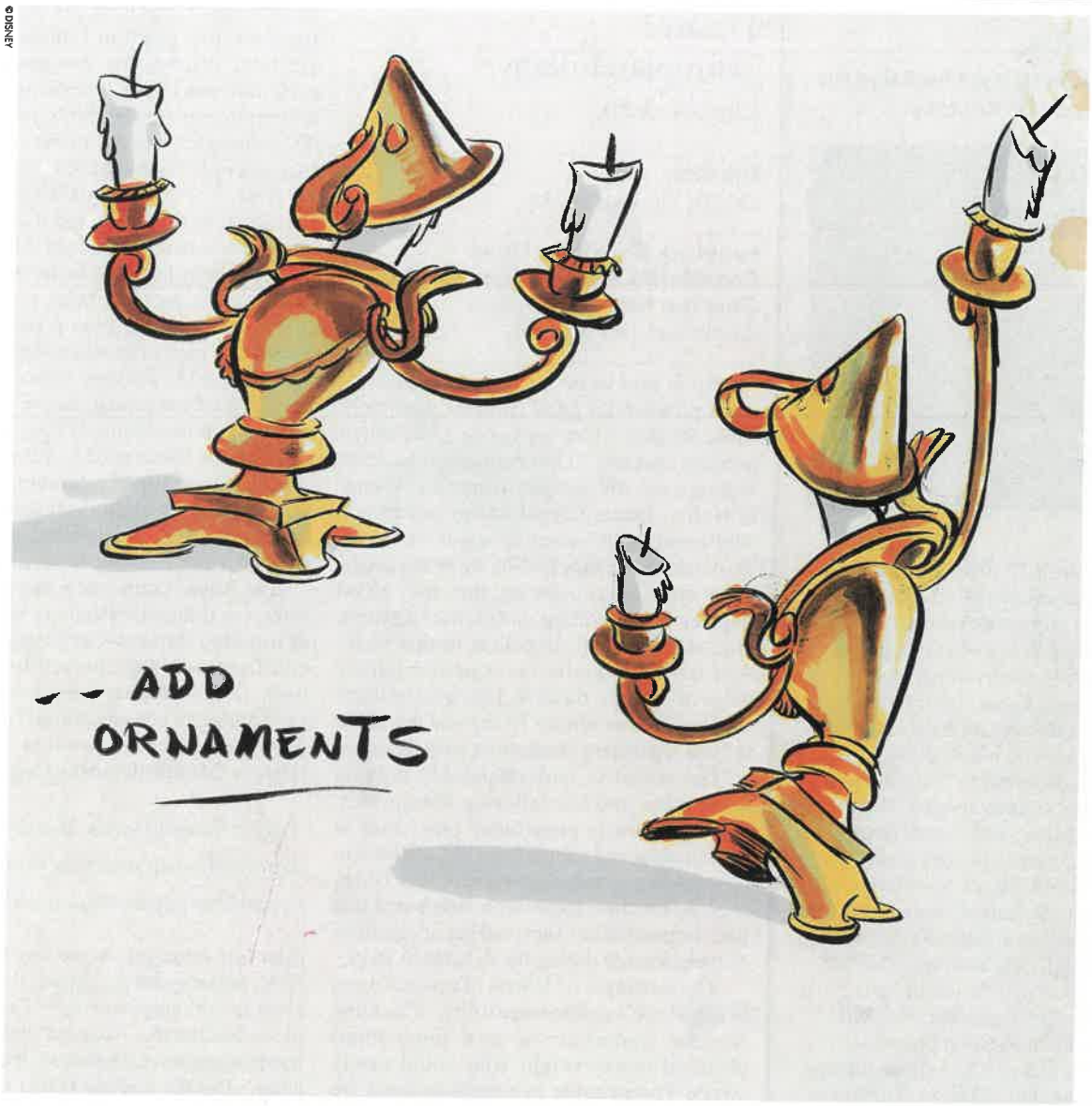
Walt Disney collected a library of more than 330 books on European art and architecture

I can't decide whether it's better to rewatch your Disneys pre-exhibition or post. Certainly, watching *Cinderella* afterwards, I noticed details I might otherwise have missed: the porcelain bookends – a pretty peasant and her simpering beau – on the King's desk; the elaborately carved legs of Lucifer's ottoman cat-bed; the Fragonard garden where the Fairy Godmother transforms Cinderella into a princess. This magical makeover was said to have been Walt's favourite scene. The Wallace displays the 24 separate drawings it took to realise a single second of Cinderella's rags turning into a ball dress. In her concept drawings, Disney artist Mary Blair had imagined Cinderella in a swirl of sparkles. Think of the animators, drawing and redrawing our heroine 24 times a second, moving each star of glitter a fraction of a millimetre each time. Witchcraft with graphite and coloured pencil.

Cinderella (1950) was before my time, but *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) I saw in the cinema. Aged 4¾, I was terrified by the wolves and smitten with Chip the teacup. Two decades later, I am still word-perfect in 'Be Our Guest', the showstopping, mouth-watering, Busby-Berkeley routine performed by the household crockery, cutlery and flirty feather dusters. 'Beef ragout, cheese soufflé,/ Pie and pudding en flambé!/ We'll prepare and serve with flair/ A culinary cabaret…'

Among the highlights of the exhibition are preliminary drawings for Cogsworth, the Beast's major-domo and mantel-clock; Lumière, master of ceremonies and candlestick; Mrs Potts, housekeeper and teapot; and her son Chip. Every detail is thought out. Where would Lumière's bronze body naturally bend? How should his wax quiff fall? And how to avoid his candleholder hands looking too much like an open lavatory bowl? Cogsworth started life as a grandfather clock but had to be shrunk to the same scale as his fellow servants. Early drawings for Mrs Potts were modelled on chinoiserie Meissen teapots, but she became shorter and stouter, even acquiring in one iteration a tartan tea cosy. Interesting to note that Lumière was silver but became gilded bronze. Metal is a particular challenge for animators. A deep yellow is more likely to be 'read' as gold than blue as silver. When Cogsworth gives Belle a tour of the Beast's castle, he spouts authoritative-sounding nonsense about 'minimalist rococo design' and 'the late neoclassic baroque period'. The Disney team knew their periods even if Cogsworth did not.

The exhibition notes make the point that some of the words we use for ornaments and furniture are body words. Clocks have faces, tables legs, vases handles 'à oreilles'. Disney's animators had a genius for anthropo-



Where would Lumière's bronze body naturally bend? How should his wax quiff fall? And how to avoid his candleholder hands looking too much like an open lavatory bowl? Preparatory drawings for Beauty and the Beast, 1991

morphism. A single sheet in the exhibition shows ten studies for the magic carpet in *Aladdin* (1992). Illustrator Randy Cartwright gives us 'excited', 'forlorn', 'thoughtful', 'dreamy', 'shocked', 'curious', 'laughing', 'exultant', 'mortified' and 'me!?', each emotion distinct and convincing. Turns out you can say a lot with a tassel. A first task for many new Disney employees was to animate a half-filled flour sack.

There's a section devoted to Fragonard's 'The Swing' (1767), a jewel in the Wallace Collection crown and a favourite of Disney artists. An early sequence for *Beauty and the Beast*, later cut, had Belle sitting on a swing pushed by her father. 'The Swing' appeared again in test loops for *Tangled* (2010), Rapunzel's lovely locks swinging behind her. Finally, the picture made it into cinemas with a cameo in *Frozen* (2013). During the picture-gallery montage, Princess Anna joyfully bounces in front of the family Fragonard, imported from the Wallace to the fictional kingdom of Arendelle. (Keen eyes might also spot paintings by Pieter Brueghel the Elder, Gerard ter Borch and John Singer Sargent.) Incidentally, it strikes me, looking at it now, that Fragonard's high-kicking lady has, like Cinderella, lost her shoe.

Mrs Potts was originally modelled on chinoiserie Meissen teapots, but she became shorter and stouter

Every week I am sent a new press release from a gallery pleased to have launched an iPad activity trail for children. It doesn't half depress me. I think of screens as a barrier between child and painting. If you don't learn to look when you're little, when will you?

This witty, inventive exhibition, full of charm and surprises, seems a perfect solution to getting kids into galleries: an introduction to rococo art, with splendid divertissements from Disney. If there's a nine-year-old girl in your life – or a 34-year-old one for that matter – put on your best glass slippers, saddle your four white mice and park your pumpkin outside the Wallace.

Inspiring Walt Disney: The Animation of French Decorative Arts *is at the Wallace Collection until 16 October.*

THE LISTENER

Father John Misty: Chloë and the Next Twentieth Century

Grade: A–

In which Josh Tillman reimagines the whole back catalogue of 20th-century American pop music (except for rock), tilting heavily in favour of the 1930s-1950s. Lush strings, polite jazz and sometimes cocktail piano, big band stuff etc., plus the expected Tillman mordant humour and some unexpected sweetness and sincerity. There's the country torch of Patsy Cline on 'Kiss Me (I Loved You)', the cabaret samba of 'Olvidado (Otro Momento)', Rodgers' and Hart's 'My Funny Valentine' homage on 'Funny Girl', and what we're told is an attempt to kind of rewrite Fred Neil's 'Everybody's Talkin'' on 'Goodbye Mr Blue'. The problem? If you hold yourself up before a century of classics on a single album, you're bound to fall short. Tillman is a very good songwriter, but nowhere is there quite the tingle you get from those first few chord changes of, say, 'Everybody's Talkin'' or 'My Funny Valentine': that moment when you suddenly realise you are listening to a song touched by greatness. Tillman compensates by rather overwriting, adding a sometimes ectoplasmic complexity to the song structures; but a change of key, or a convoluted bridge, does not compensate for a defining moment of genius – it simply makes the lack of that spark more noticeable. Still, I can't think of any contemporary talent who could have come closer than Tillman does here and all of the songs have enough to pull you in for a while. Just not quite enough to be reimagined themselves 70 years from now, I suspect. Inspirational lyric: 'The Nazis we hired for our wedding band played your anthem like I wasn't there.'

— Rod Liddle

Theatre

Trumpian lullaby

Lloyd Evans

The 47th
The Old Vic, until 28 May

For Black Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Hue Gets Too Heavy
Royal Court, until 30 April

Trump is said to be a gift for bad satirists and a problem for good ones. He dominates Mike Bartlett's new play, *The 47th*, which predicts that the 2024 presidential election will be a run-off between Trump and Kamala Harris. Bertie Carvel's Orangeman is a subtle and highly amusing spoof that never descends into exaggeration or grotesquery. The visuals are convincing: the sandy blond wig, the baggy golfing outfits, the spare tyre around the midriff. Excellent design work. And Bartlett captures the repetitive lullaby pulse of Trump's rhetoric. Like a lot of liberals, he seems to admire Trump and this show reflects a perverse fascination with its target.

The script is understandably soft on Sleepy Joe and his faltering brainpower. Simon Williams generously plays him as an articulate and principled elder statesman. If only! We're asked to believe that Biden remains on close terms with Harris and that their friendship has survived her accusations of racism made during the debates in 2019.

The portrayal of Harris (Tamara Tunie) is the show's central absurdity. 'Cackling Kamala' comes across as a super-smart political heavyweight who could easily sweep Trump aside in a head-to-head. So what happened to the real Harris, the dim-witted irrelevance, the international joke, the simpering lightweight who giggles during press conferences and makes banality-crammed speeches that seem to be aimed at pre-schoolers? In fact, Harris has little chance of running in 2024, either as vice-president or for the top job, because schemers in the White House are plotting her ruin, and even in her home state of California her approval ratings are in free fall. It's a shame that this promising play is so detached from its subject-matter but the creative team have decided to write about US politics without reading about it. The big issues of the past 12 months are overlooked: inflation, gas prices, Voter ID, Hunter Biden, the teaching of critical race theory and trans ideology in schools. All ignored. Foreign policy is mentioned once. 'Ukraine'. That's it. A single word. Trying to learn about American politics from this play is like watching porn to find out how to fix a bathroom shower.

The surreal storyline uses crazy inventions and non sequiturs. Trump campaigns on the fascist slogan 'America Rules', and he chooses Ivanka as his running mate (haven't they heard of Candace Owens?). He later ditches his daughter when he remembers that he's a sexist who believes a woman can't do a man's job. During a TV debate, his fans storm the studio and he incites a riot. 'Enjoy the flames of freedom,' he cries. That sounds defamatory but the play is set in the future and it clearly pitches itself as a fantasy. And yet this weakens it as satire. Why not stick to the truth – unless you fear that the truth helps your enemies? It's significant that Trump voters are portrayed as a mob of drunken subhumans who brutalise and maim their enemies. Supporters of the Democratic cause should take note of that distortion. If they want to win in 2024, the Dems need to attract GOP loyalists and to stop condemning them as a lumpen mass of brain-dead savages. That's the key message of this play but it's unlikely to be heard let alone heeded.

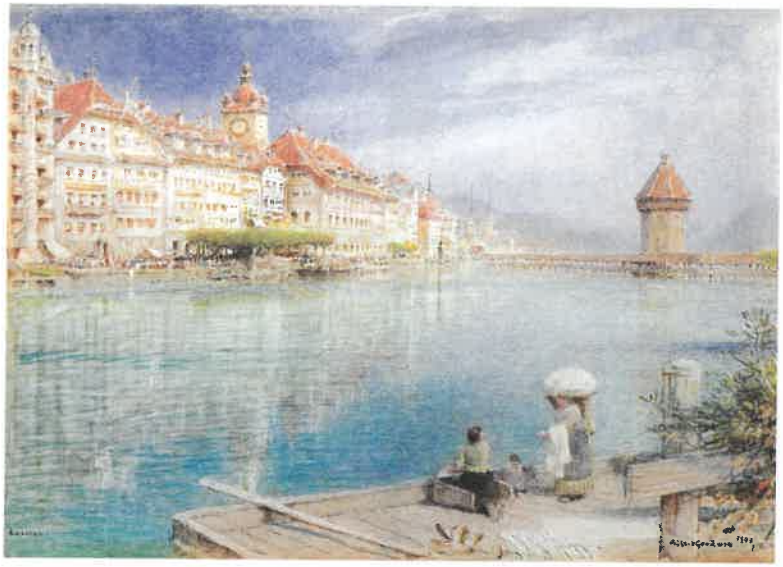
The Royal Court's new show, *For Black Boys*, is a dramatised therapy session aimed at troubled African-Caribbeans. The lads talk fearlessly and eloquently about their lives. One youngster hates being jeered at for wanting to educate himself or for speaking grammatically. Another finds Black History Month demoralising. 'Telling a man our ancestors were out there in the field, picking cotton, getting their ass beat? How is that empowering?' They all struggle to combat the 'bad man' stereotype, 'the hyper-aggressive, hardened, thug-like character'. But the tragedy is that this image is accepted, and tacitly amplified, by parts of the black community. 'Time we started being more responsible for the promotion of our people.'

Like a lot of liberals, Bartlett seems to admire Trump and this show reflects a perverse fascination with its target

Their problems begin early. A schoolboy finds that white girls won't kiss him in the playground and he longs for them to chase him like 'a Poundland Leonardo DiCaprio'. But he's stuck with his skin colour. 'I'm already learning new ways to hate me,' he says. This boy is six years old. Parents are not always helpful. A mother quips sardonically: 'The best way to keep something from a black man is to put it in a book.' Absentee fathers are a problem but so are dads who show up drunk, and assault their children. The play suggests that there is little desire within the black community to curb this.

The show makes its points forcefully but it aims primarily to please the crowd. It has a warm, self-mocking, big-hearted atmosphere. Schools should see this. So should MPs. It's worth a thousand sociology reports compiled by right-on think tanks. And it's fun.

CHRIS BEETLES GALLERY



Lucerne, watercolour, 10 ½ x 14 ¾ inches

This important exhibition of 55 original works from one private collection will be on display in the gallery. They are recorded in a fully illustrated, 86 page catalogue with extensive artist's diary notes.

Available only on direct contact with the gallery, £15 with free p&p for *Spectator* readers, UK only.

All works are available to purchase and can be viewed on our website

www.chrisbeetles.com

ALBERT GOODWIN RWS (1845-1932)

The John and Mary Goodyear Collection

26 April – 14 May 2022

The Source of the Sacred River, oil on canvas, 21 ½ x 35 inches

8 & 10 Ryder Street St James's London SW1Y 6QB • 020 7839 7551 • gallery@chrisbeetles.com • Monday-Saturday 10am-5.30pm

©VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM, LONDON. PHOTO: JON STOKES

The presence of these pots, so enjoyable singly, is made all the more resonant by such grouping, the way they speak to each other

Exhibitions

Pot head

David Sexton

Richard Batterham: Studio Potter
Victoria & Albert Museum,
until 26 September

Richard Batterham died last September at the age of 85. He had worked in his pottery in the village of Durweston near Blandford Forum in Dorset for 60 years continuously. It was, in its own way, an heroic life.

Batterham took an astonishingly pure, austere approach to his work. Quite simply, he undertook every part of the process of making himself. He made his own stoneware clay bodies, arguing that those who used bought-in clay missed out on the beginning of the whole process and were mistaken to think that they could just inject their artistry at a later stage.

He threw his pots on an archaic kick-wheel. He did not decorate them, save by working the clay itself by incision, flutings and chatterings, to shape the piece and catch and display the glaze. His exquisite ash and iron glazes in greens and greys he made himself too, arriving at them by a process of trial and error, always testing, adjusting, choosing.

Despite early recognition of the excellence of his work, he eschewed all self-promotion, keeping his prices modest, to make it available for use as well as display.

When he did speak about his work, it was in the briefest, most understated and practical terms only, as I found out when trying to interview him once. He liked to talk about the pots as though they evolved almost without his conscious participation, leaving him to look at them afterwards, select what worked best and take it forward. By this process of ceaseless refinement, his work achieved extraordinary subtlety, the smallest changes of form and glaze taking on significance in the unbroken series. For the most remarkable of his austerities was that, as well as focusing his life so certainly from an early age and simplifying his working practice so decisively, he chose to make a relatively small range of pots over and over again. Batterham, in a way nobody else has ever quite done, made a tradition of himself.

Batterham, in a way nobody else has ever quite done, made a tradition of himself

Not that his pots ever were the same. Each one, even in the domestic ware, is different, subtly but eloquently. Some sing more than others, Batterham would say. All, though, have a vitality that's there in his very handling of the clay.

Throughout his career, Batterham kept back certain pots that he felt had something special about them, good or bad, as a reference for himself – and, after downing his tools, he collaborated on an exhibition of the good ones, supplemented by some of the pots he and his family used at home, a particularly appropriate undertaking given his approach to developing his work.

The show is exemplary. The spacious, light-filled Room 146 at the end of the Ceramics Galleries at the V&A, dedicated to *Richard Batterham: Studio Potter*, is one of the pleasures of London right now: the presence of these pots, so enjoyable singly, is made all the more resonant by such grouping, the way they speak to each other. The exhibition has also been commemorated by a handsome, scholarly book, *Richard Bat-*

terham Studio Potter, edited by Tanya Harrod and Sarah Griffin, with rewarding essays and superb photographs by Jon Stokes (V&A Publishing, £30).

Such a retrospective allows critical responses to formulate too, of course – about the way he made monumental versions of domestic forms without much altering them, say, or about the sometimes stretched claims of utility for what clearly are strictly display pieces. But the overwhelming response to the exhibition can only be of gratitude, not only for the creation of such consistent beauty but for the way he made it available for people to incorporate into the fabric of their lives.

I've used Batterham's pots daily for 30-odd years and would be bereft without them. They are a constant kindness in life. Living so closely with them means these simple pieces can shape your sensibility more directly than less accessible fine artworks, I have come to understand.

Batterham, who spent two years at St Ives, was of course a potter in the Anglo-Oriental Leach tradition of the 'ethical pot', its value supposedly certified by the quiet rural life of the maker.

This movement, once so dominant, was effectively shredded by the polemical biog-

I've used Batterham's pots daily for 30-odd years. They are a constant kindness in life

raphy of Bernard Leach published by today's leading ceramicist Edmund de Waal in 1998, exposing Leach's dodgy orientalism, his surprising ignorance of Japanese, his reliance on assistants for throwing, the windiness of his pronouncements in *A Potter's Book*, and so forth.

The vigour of this attack derived partly from the fact that de Waal himself had tried hard for many years to become a Leach-style rural, ethical potter himself, before realising that he simply did not like the heavy murky stoneware he was producing and turning to the exquisite porcelain work for which he is celebrated now.

Perhaps de Waal's writings have seriously undermined the intellectual foundations of the movement that Batterham emerged from? Perhaps it was almost a fiction? Yet the achievement remains, the work unarguable. It's particularly poignant thinking about this at the V&A now, where the central cupola of the Ceramics Galleries houses de Waal's astounding permanent installation 'Signs & Wonders', 425 porcelain vessels, arranged in a circle, so high as to be only partially visible, a reflection on the whole history of the collection – while there at the far end of the galleries is displayed for now the tradition that one man working alone made of himself with such singular integrity.

johndaviesgallery
NORTH COTSWOLDS

Chris Prout: Boatyard, Blakeney Acrylic, 50 x 100 cm £3,800

Hannah Woodman: Indigo clouds II, Nanjizal M/m, 57 x 77 cm £2,200

Three Outstanding Landscape Artists

Louise Balaam · Hannah Woodman · Chris Prout

featuring locations in Cornwall, the Cotswolds, Norfolk, Wales & the Western Isles of Scotland

Exhibition April 30th - May 21st
Wednesday to Saturday

Please call or email for a Complimentary Catalogue
Tel: 01608 652255 · Email: gallery@johndaviesgallery.com

Louise Balaam: Golden light remembered, Colonsay Oil, 70 x 80 cm £6,000

The Old Dairy Plant · Fosseway Business Park · Moreton-in-Marsh · GL56 9NQ
This exhibition can be viewed online at www.johndaviesgallery.com

Television

Don't frighten the horses

James Walton

Chivalry
Channel 4

Life After Life
BBC2

Chivalry – written by and starring Sarah Solemani and Steve Coogan – is a comedy drama about post-#MeToo Hollywood life. It's perhaps not surprising, then, that the show's chief characteristic so far has been nervousness. Somewhere inside it, you feel, lurks an impulse to really let rip. But if so, Thursday's first two episodes successfully resisted it. Now and again, we did get some jokes that might just frighten the admittedly neurotic horses of the new Moral Majority. The overall effect, though, was of a game of How Far Can You Go? in which the contestants' answer was a firm 'not very'.

Still, even this level of unorthodoxy seemed unlikely when the programme began. Coogan plays Cameron O'Neill, a Hollywood producer first seen beside a swimming pool asking a pair of bikini-clad lovelies if they might be interested in a trip to the Caribbean. Sadly, the conversation was

This is a show whose central approach to its own subject is to tiptoe carefully around it

interrupted by the arrival of Bobby Sohrabi (Solemani), a British director – and wearer of T-shirts saying 'Women Unite' – brought in by the studio to reshoot parts of his latest film along more acceptable lines.

The set-up became broader still when the pair had a meeting with the original director, who just had time to rather hammily confirm his sexist-dinosaur credentials before he conveniently died, leaving the two principals to slug it out between themselves. And for a while, *Chivalry* proceeded from there pretty much as you'd expect, with Cameron (boo!) rolling his eyes at Bobby's censoriousness and Bobby (hurray!) rolling hers at Cameron's tragic tendency to fancy attractive young women.

Fortunately, the programme did perk up when other characters were added to the mix, some even bringing with them welcome glimmers of complexity. There is, for example, Jean (Wanda Sykes), a studio executive who as a black woman is exempt from the rules that apply to Cameron. ('You can say anything you like,' he complained to her at one stage. 'I know – isn't it hilarious?' she replied.) Before long, Bobby also brought in her old friend Tatiana (Aisling Bea), a former chiropractor who'd used lockdown to retrain as that now-mandatory feature of Hollywood filmmaking: an intimacy supervisor. 'I'm just here to make everyone feel comfortable,' Tatiana declared/recited – the trouble being that her platitudes got in the way of such other mandatory features of filmmaking as actually making a film. Equally annoying for Bobby was the male stand-in for the new, less objectifying sex scenes. 'I'm just super-aware that I want to be respectful to women,' he declared/recited – the trouble being that his character was a Nazi having sex with a woman in occupied France.

And yet, even at these moments of comparative daringness, the programme's nervousness made itself felt, largely in the form of little backtracking sermons from Bobby about how toxic you-know-what had made such things necessary. In other words, the 'debate' promised in *Chivalry*'s advance publicity takes place within strictly approved parameters – and the sense remains that this is a show whose central approach to its own subject is to tiptoe carefully around it.

For all its brilliance, Kate Atkinson's 2013 novel *Life After Life* has never seemed an obvious candidate for a screen adaptation, let alone a faithful one. Nonetheless, BBC2's new four-part drama takes a fairly creditable stab at it.

The main character is Ursula Todd who, unusually for a literary protagonist, dies as a newborn baby. Happily, she's then born again on the same day in 1910 and this time survives – at least until she's five, when she drowns at the seaside. And with that, she's born again in 1910 and makes it through her seaside scare, before falling to her death from her bedroom window a few years later. Gradually, the memories of her previous existences allow her to avoid the dangers that ended each of them, although only with other lethal dangers taking their place.

In lesser hands, this would have been a novel too dominated by its own high-concept premise: that all of us could have lived many different lives of many different lengths. In fact, what made it such a great read was that, once the concept was in place, Atkinson concentrated her considerable firepower on making every one of the lives entirely vivid.

And, wisely enough, this is what the TV version does too, with the first episode serving up a thoroughly imagined portrait of a comfortable middle-class family before the first world war – and of the war's devastating impact. Inevitably, there's a certain lack of jeopardy involved when the death of the protagonist is never terminal. At the same time, however, showing us how fragile and provisional everything is not only proves a highly affecting reminder of the miraculousness of being here at all. It also imbues even the most everyday events with a kind of mythic significance.

Podcasts

Rebel yell

Daisy Dunn

The Last Bohemians; How To Academy
Apple Podcasts, Spotify and various platforms

Ordinarily, if a podcast purports to be revelatory, you can assume it is anything but. There's a glut of programmes at the moment featuring interviewer and interviewee locked in passionate heart-to-hearts in which a few, carefully selected beans are spilled to no real consequence or effect. *The Last Bohemians* makes no claim to shatter the earth with secrets, but the guests are so unguarded that the episodes possess that longed-for bite.

Maggi Hambling reels off a to-do list she made at art school while she was seeking to lose her virginity: 'Older man, younger man, black man, woman'. Dana Gillespie, singer and former flame of David Bowie, describes undoing her top button to be photographed in the cleavage-obsessed press of her youth. And actress Cleo Sylvestre speaks of the fungus-filled mess of the young Rolling Stones's flat and of turning down a marriage proposal from Mick Jagger (she felt it wouldn't last as he became more successful; the dirty milk bottles couldn't have helped).

The first series of this podcast aired in March 2019, and a new series has been

Hutchinson makes no attempt to apologise for the odd un-PC remark or to filter what these women say

released each spring since, except for last year when, presenter Kate Hutchinson explains, she experienced a crisis of confidence. Her task is by no means easy. Her guests are mainly older women who grew up in the 1960s and retain a certain rebelliousness of spirit. There is no use in being obsequious towards them. Hutchinson pleasingly makes no attempt to apologise for the odd un-PC remark or to filter what these women say. If anything she earns their respect by assuming something of their demeanour. It is one thing for Gillespie and Sylvestre to reflect that they might have been more successful than they are. It is quite another for the presenter to say so. Dana (rhyme with 'spanner') Gillespie speaks candidly of failing to receive adequate recognition as a singer-songwriter. I had no idea that David Bowie wrote 'Andy Warhol' for her to perform only to record his own version first, which of course became better known. Gillespie has no hard feelings about this. She has only good things to say about Bowie and his former wife Angie who, similarly, she suggests, deserves more credit for her role in creating Ziggy Stardust.

Gillespie first met Bowie at the Marquee Club when she was 15. He asked to go home with her and she agreed, struck by his blond 'Sherwood Forest look'. She was living with her parents at the time. The casualness with which they seem to have reacted to her pushing the young star out of her single bed in the morning while clambering into her school uniform seems extraordinary today. 'I was underage,' she says, 'but who gave a toss?'

Gillespie's description of the 1960s as 'pure and innocent' may initially puzzle, but listening to the three women interviewed so far in this series, you begin to understand what she means. The gulf between then and now could hardly be greater. When Hutchinson asks Hambling about her sexuality with the question 'How did you identify back then?', Hambling sounds irritated. 'What do you mean identify? What is all this?' The concept of 'women's art', a popular label in modern galleries, is as alien to her as 'having shows of people with red hair'.

These words run through my mind when I listen to novelist Max Porter discuss his book on Francis Bacon (to whom Hambling's late partner Henrietta Moraes played muse) on the excellent biweekly *How To Academy* podcast. Porter, born in 1981, may be some years younger than the last bohemians, but he emerges as a kindred spirit in his willingness to say what many of his contemporaries are afraid to.

Many will be grateful to him for bashing 'the great stupidification of the cultural industry that we're living through', and the 'vicious and condescending' nature of cultural conservatism, which demands that writers treat readers as idiots, and spoon-feed them information. Equally, Porter's despair at the place of 'algorithmic tendencies' in commercial publishing houses, which categorise books as 'prize-winning' or 'for fans of Sally Rooney' or such like will delight many authors. For the rest of the episode, chaired by superbly inquisitive Esme Bright, I sat absorbed in Porter's virtuoso reading from his book. It is truly worthy of a performance by Benedict Cumberbatch.

The concept of 'women's art' is as alien to Hambling as 'having shows of people with red hair'

Listening makes you realise how few opportunities there now are for bohemian souls like Bacon. The pressure to fit one mould or another has placed a suffocating hold on all but a few lucky escape artists. The situation wasn't necessarily better last century; Gillespie, Hambling and Sylvestre were evidently held back. But incompliance is now as major a limiting factor as identity in the path to success. The dilemma is, does anyone dare rebel?

Cinema

You're Nicked

Deborah Ross

The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent

15, Nationwide

The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent stars Nicolas Cage playing a version of Nicolas Cage, in a parody of Nicolas Cage and the many, many films of Nicolas Cage. This couldn't, you will have already surmised, be more Nicolas Cage, and if you are wondering how much Nicolas Cage is too much Nicolas Cage you could say any amount of Nicolas Cage is always too much Nicolas Cage. But that's exactly what this film is playing with and it's a hoot.

It is directed by Tom Gormican, who co-wrote the film with Kevin Etten, and Nicolas Cage plays 'Nick Cage', a Hollywood movie star famed for his unique, unhinged intensity – why does that sound familiar? – who has an ex-wife (a wry Sharon Horgan), a teenage

DUNCAN WOOD

28 April – 20 May 2022

Private View
Wednesday 27 April 6 – 8pm

Monday - Friday 10.00-5.30
Saturday by appointment

Browse & Darby

19 Cork Street London W1S 3LP
Tel: (44) 020 7734 7984 Fax: (44) 020 7851 6650
E-mail: art@browseanddarby.co.uk
www.browseanddarby.co.uk

Duncan Wood, *Cloud 1*, oil on paper on board, 21 x 27 cm.

NOTES ON...

Hitchhiking

By *Charlie Metcalfe*

When I first saw Vitaly I thought he was drunk. I was standing outside a petrol station near Fulda, in central Germany, when he pulled up in a battered Saab. Mud covered the entire left side of his car and the rear bumper hung like a drooping bottom lip. His hair was greasy. He looked as if he hadn't slept in weeks. Only later did I discover that he had just fled besieged Kyiv. He was now driving to Bern in Switzerland, where he hoped to find work. I was heading to Morzine for a family skiing holiday. Vitaly offered me a lift.

My decision to hitchhike the 428-mile journey from Fulda to Morzine had been in part to test whether it was possible. I hitchhiked across the Balkans and then the Caucasus when I was at university. Now I wondered if the fear of Covid would put drivers off picking up strangers.

Some people claim hitchhiking became redundant years before the pandemic. The *Guardian* declared its death in 2016 after New Zealand police arrested a French hitchhiker for abusing local residents when he failed to catch a ride for four days. But the article failed to mention that the man had been attempting to leave a remote coastal village with a population of only 70.

A eulogy to hitchhiking may be premature but there's no doubt it's in a dormant period. In the mid-20th century it was common to see hikers sticking their thumbs out beside the road. Hitchhiking's golden age was in the 1960s and 1970s, thanks in large part to the popularity of the hippie trail across Europe and Asia. Today, hitchhiking's decline is down to a lack of willing hikers, if anything, not a lack of friendly drivers. A successful hike requires only one driver to pull over, after all.

Most people who are averse to hitchhiking cite 'danger' as their principal reason. In the act of raising a thumb, a hiker offers up him- or herself to the mercy of whoever drives past. It requires a certain faith that the driver offering the ride will be a good person (or, at the very least, a decent driver. And bad driving is, as the online hitchhiking guide Hitchwiki states, the worst most people can expect to encounter). Dismissing a centuries-old mode of transport over concerns for safety seems bizarre, but also typical of our era of no fun. Bad things have happened to hitchhikers. But they've happened to horsemen, drivers and motorcycle riders too.

Hitchhiking provides a solution to several of the crises of our time. It's cheap when transport costs are higher than ever. It helps the climate by filling seats in empty cars. And after two years of Covid making it nearly impossible to meet new people, it offers a unique way to interact with people from any background you can imagine.

Vitaly confessed late in our journey that he had run out of money. His phone had no internet connection, which he needed to navigate to his Chechen friend's house in the Swiss countryside. It was dark outside. I offered to remain with him to help on the condition his friend could host me for the night. That evening we sat around a pot of lamb stew while Vitaly and his friend shared stories of Russian oppression. If I had taken the train or plane, that interaction would never have taken place. I was glad to have stuck my thumb out.

FRANCE

RENOVATED IDYLLIC FARMHOUSE near Bergerac. Sleeps 10 - 5 bedrooms; private pool; all dates avail. Contact 0117 9684342. Please visit: https://www.rent-in-france.co.uk/

DATING

MEET OTHER CHRISTIANS using a safe, personalised and reassuringly traditional approach you can trust. Call today and find out how you too could be introduced to your soul mate. Tel: 0208 088 3412

SPEECH WRITING

SPEECH WRITING. RELAX, WE'LL WRITE IT FOR YOU! You're due to speak/present at a wedding/event. Don't worry – call Lawrence & team on 0207 118 1600 or www.greatspeechwriting.com

PROPERTY TO LET

PART-TIME COMMUTE? Luxury riverside flat with secure parking at SW6 available for let Tues./Wed./Thursday. Contact anddean2@gmail.com

BOOKS

THINKING OF MOVING? We buy mainly 'housefuls' of books; we thin existing collections and clear deceased's libraries. History, Art, Architecture, Travel, other subjects. Prompt payment; no commission or charges. ROTHWELL & DUNWORTH. Tel: 01398 323169, Email: info@rdbooks.co.uk

SPECTATOR SHOP
www.spectator.co.uk/shop

FINE FOOD

Advertise in *The Spectator* classified, email wendy.adade@canopymedia.co.uk

CLASSIFIEDS
Travel & Fine Watches

TRAVEL

TRAILFINDERS
THE TRAVEL EXPERTS

ALL YOUR ARRANGEMENTS IN ONE PLACE

Trustpilot ★★★★★
"Truly excellent: patient, friendly, helpful & a mine of knowledge, tips and advice."

TRUST *TRAILFINDERS*

Book with confidence with Trailfinders' Peace of Mind Policy.

Bespoke travel from the most trusted name in travel.

FIND **the answers to all your travel needs**

Tailormade Travel Worldwide	020 7368 1440
First & Business Class Travel	020 7368 1441
Corporate Travel	020 7368 1499
Cruise Trailfinders	020 7368 1443
Private Touring Worldwide	020 7368 1442
Group Travel	020 7368 1453
Honeymoons & Wishlist	020 7368 1454
Travel Insurance – with Covid-19 cover	020 7408 9005

TF TRUST

TRAILFINDERS FINANCIAL GUARANTEE

trailfinders.com

NO ONE LOOKS AFTER YOU BETTER

IATA

FINE WATCHES

WE BUY!

WATCHES BY PATEK PHILIPPE, ROLEX & OTHER TOP MAKERS

BEN WRIGHT VINTAGE WATCHES

Contact us on 07814 757742 or ben@benwrightvintagewatches.co.uk

How do I stop my father's girlfriend from boiling a whole kettle of water for just one cup of tea?
— Dear Mary, p61

LIFE

High life
Taki

New York

Our own Douglas Murray is the canary in the Bagel coal mine as of late. The left controls culture, education and technology over here, but a few canaries are still free to warn the rest of us that we're being taken for a ride. Here's a warning to those multimillionaires who get down on one knee every weekend to make themselves feel better for getting lotsa moolah for playing a game in the sun. It has to do with black lives and whether they matter or not.

Black lives do matter, but not to those who run the racket that goes by the acronym BLM. According to Murray, writing in the *New York Post*, the biggest lie is the racket behind the rhetoric. One year ago the details of BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors's real-estate empire emerged. She owned four homes and seemed to be shopping for more. And this month we found that BLM, funded by well-meaning gullible folk who gave generously to the cause, bought a $5.8 million California mansion. Cullors's response was to call the revelations 'racist and sexist'.

Far more important than the facts of BLM co-founder's riches are some facts revealed by the Brit canary in the coal mine. Here's what Douglas had to say in a nutshell: left-wing papers like the *NY Times* and Bezos-owned *Washington Post*, plus CNN and MSNBC, pretend that racism is a pandemic and unarmed black people in America are killed with impunity by the cops. Among liberals, 40 per cent believe the figure is between 1,000 and 10,000 annually. The actual number in 2019 was about ten. For any of you who failed maths at school, as I did, the big lie by the lefty media simply multiplies the number by 1,000. Just think of it for a moment. Platforms supposed to objectively inform the public leave them misinformed a thousand-fold in order to discredit the police, and to convince the world that Uncle Sam is a racist beast. Our old friend Zuckerberg did what was expected of him and classified the *New York Post*'s original exposé of Cullors as 'abusive' and prevented it from being shared on its platform.

BLM originally claimed they would address the ills that plague America. The moolah rolled in and the organisation bought a mansion in a chic area of El Lay. Big Tech buried critical stories. This is America today, a place run by hustlers who are protected by smarter hustlers eager to be woke icons. Otherwise, the Bagel is getting more violent by the minute, the latest incident being a gunman shooting about ten people in a crowded subway car and stopping only when the Glock he was using jammed. He got away but his picture, age and name were posted while the fuzz was looking for him The *NY Times* buried it, however, because the perp happened to be black.

There are of course reasons to laugh and be merry. All one has to do is look at the *NY Times* headlines. On 12 April in bold letters: 'Woman Pleads Guilty to Tackling Black Teen in Lobby of Hotel.' To tell the truth, I think there is something very funny about a grown woman tackling a black youth in a hotel – mistakenly as it turned out, because he had not stolen her mobile phone. A man-bites-dog story and funny because the paper treated it as though it were a major crime. American women tackle men all the time in hotels. In a more serious vein, accused murderers are automatically sprung every day because of bail laws that make it possible, but the word most heard and used around the Bagel is racism.

One has to laugh at this joke culture and the slow death of this once great city. I go out all the time and am yet to be nicked as crime goes through the roof, but I worry about my buddy Michael who lives in Brooklyn in the middle of all the carnage. And while politicians spin the violence in the Bagel, and the TV networks warn us about the dangers of white supremacy, the cops continue to be handcuffed and the criminals coddled.

The language, too, has gone south. While ghetto vernacular is in, a mid-Atlantic accent is almost a capital offence. This mindset has even affected the clothes we wear. Good-looking preppie or clubby men are out, but those ghastly bald types with beards are viewed as sensitive and with it. Brooks Brothers and Abercrombie served preppies these past 100 years. But who goes there now? Both were seen as being out of step with millennial and Generation-Z customers. Papa Hemingway used Abercrombie for fishing and hunting gear, and F. Scott Fitzgerald was a Brooks Brothers devotee. Now both stores are disappearing, their demise hastened by an activist (read busybody asshole with a bald head and long beard) who demanded that Abercrombie make plus-sized clothing for the slobs that Americans have turned into.

That's the good news I have for you from slob city this week. If I survive stray bullets over the coming weekend – I plan to eat out every day and even visit the park – I'll have better news for you next week.

Low life
Jeremy Clarke

I was walking across a fallow field to the pub with my two grandsons. 'What's this?' said my 11-year-old Oscar, showing me a bone he'd noticed embedded in the footpath and prised out. I rubbed the mud off the delicate, strangely beautiful thing with my thumb. 'That,' I said, with more authority than knowledge, 'is the shoulder blade of a hare. I'll clean it up when we get back and if you keep it in your pocket it'll bring you good luck.' 'What is luck?' said Klynton, aged ten. 'Hard to explain,' I said. 'Lucky people have mostly good things happen to them; unlucky people mostly bad. But nobody believes in luck any more. Not really.'

We were walking to the pub for a fare-

well supper. I'd rung up and booked a table. The grandsons had stayed with me in the borrowed house for three days. Early tomorrow they were leaving for Devon and the day after that I was returning to France. For me it had been a precious time and now it was nearly ended. They were hungry and excited to be going to the pub, said my always unassuming lads.

At the pub a woman from one of the Baltic states wearing comic glasses showed us to a table and gave us each a menu card. She went away and came back a minute later and said: 'Mr Clarke, can you move to that table over there? I forgot that this table is booked from 6.15 by regulars who, believe me, are very frightening. Please save my life, Mr Clarke, by moving to that one.'

So we gathered up our wet things and moved to the smaller, obscurer table and she thanked us with all of her heart and returned to the kitchen. A minute later she was back. 'Mr Clarke, I feel terrible. This is not a nice table. Please. There is a table free in the snug. Please go and sit there. Go. It is much nicer there. Trust me.' This was all very exciting if you haven't been to an English country pub before or for a very long time. Once again we gathered up our things and went into the drinking side of the pub and arranged ourselves at a table.

She was right: it was far more congenial and interesting opposite the big fire with customers coming and going and greeting each other. The smoky spot felt like the beating heart of the village. A smart-looking woman

'That,' I said, with more authority than knowledge, 'is the shoulder blade of a hare'

came in and someone kissed her hand with deferential rapture. This was probably a joke, I explained. A woman with a sad, lop-sided expression confessed to a passing acquaintance that she'd popped in for one at lunchtime and hadn't been able to tear herself away. Then had a sneezing fit. Her sneezes were productive. The perky little pub terrier trotted in and hopped up on a nearby stool and allowed us to pat and stroke him for a moment. He wasn't sure of us but we cajoled him into it. The lady with the comic glasses came and deferentially took our order – burger and chips – from the grandad with regrowing hair and his two shy lads.

Without us getting involved or being expected to, the conversations being held on the line of bar stools and among the standees seemed to imperceptibly adjust themselves in a friendly, welcoming way to the new presence of one stranger and two boys. It all felt rather extraordinary. Especially if you were as unused to English country pubs as we were.

'Do you have to go back?' said Oscar. I did, I said. I had to go back to get some more tablets. 'Tablets for what?' he said. 'For my illness,' I said. 'What illness?' he said. 'Cancer,' I said. I hadn't told him before. I'd always dodged questions like that before. Now was as good a time as any to answer frankly, I thought. Oscar didn't say anything, but he wasn't jarred either and I was glad.

'Is that because of bad luck?' said Klynton. 'Maybe,' I said.

After that we sat in companionable silence for a few minutes and watched more customers come and go, some diffidently, some confidently, and soon we forgot about it entirely because our burgers arrived and Klynton had made his 'thank you' sound like 'fuck you' as that transparently innocent Chelsea player N'gGolo Kanté famously does in post-match interviews.

The burgers were top drawer. The handmade chips came in a little warmed china pot. We quickly polished it all off, then the chocolate sponge with vanilla ice cream. The bar traffic increased as the early session intensified. I paid and said cheerio and we walked back across the field in sunshine. Looking up the bone on the internet back at the house, I found I had the right animal but the wrong bone. It was a pelvic girdle. And hare bones are said to bring bad luck, not good.

Ben Nicholson Throws a Rubber Shark at Eileen Agar
Polzeath, July 1937

Perhaps there is more than one way of loving the world, Miss Agar.
Perhaps you are right.
I am booting lonely stones on Perranporth Beach as I struggle with this letter
late this morning by the hunting sea.

I apologise again for that silliness with the shark.
My memory has fixed a photograph of you
smearing blood from above your cut lip
inadvertently down and over your mouth.

So a tiny red haze of cloud blurs above the pad as I sketch,
drawing from the touch of things and from memory.
I am working on a half-landscape of plates which are suns
and the flanks of hills too, quartered.

Near my fingertips this morning
were the cups and bottles on my kitchen table.
I'm doing this, Miss Agar – I want to tell you this, despite my error –
because I am hesitant about the world.

Perhaps I don't, as you said, love the world at all
and design only altars that spurn worship
and colour them white and call them something else.
That blue-on-darker-blue *Biting Sea* you once gave me

I have still. Always, even if I close my eyes,
the sound about me all the time is the pursuing,
shushing, jabbing sea
that smooths a hand towards me
and rubs itself out.

— *Robert Stein*

Real life

Melissa Kite

When the vet had finished giving my horses their annual flu boosters, she reminded me the vaccination regime had changed. For the purpose of competing, horses must be vaccinated for flu every six months, which is something that had passed me by.

What with worrying about human vaccines, I had not noticed this change in the rules for equestrian jabs.

I thought about it for a split second, then decided. 'Lucky I don't compete then,' I told her. Because being a rabid anti-vaxxer, I don't want my horses pumped more full of vaccine than is absolutely necessary.

And this is precisely the sort of irrational and illogical reaction people have come to expect from someone like me.

I admit it, I'm so anti-vaccine I pay a vet to come out and give my horses a flu jab every year, and I don't just unquestioningly agree when, after 20 years of this routine, for various horses, with no problems, the vet suddenly informs me that many owners are giving the same jab every six months now.

'In terms of immunity,' said the young girl, as she put the used syringes back into the boot of a 4x4 she didn't look old enough to drive, 'it obviously doesn't make any difference.' (The vets are now so young you have to help them. This one wrote April 2021 beside the vaccine stamp on the horse passport.)

'I'm sorry, what?' I asked. 'Well, obviously, they don't need vaccinating every six months, it's just the rules have changed.'

I suppose this rule change will, coincidentally, make everyone involved, from vets to vaccine manufacturers, a nice pile of money, but all the same I said I would ring and make an appointment as usual next year.

She said that was fine, because it didn't really matter. Just if I wanted to compete, I would have to have more vaccine.

Broadly, in terms of booking them in, it didn't make any difference if I made it six months, eight months or 12 months. It didn't sound very precise, is what occurred to me.

I said I would definitely bear that in mind, and I would ring and book my thoroughbred Darcy in for a six-month booster if I suddenly felt the urge to take her to Hickstead. But while saying this, I made a mental note to possibly try even less hard than I already do when I have my jumping lessons.

I'm 50, so I think I'm doing pretty well to still be on a horse, never mind jumping. Once a week, with a trainer who is extremely patient with me, I do little jumps, much littler than Darcy is capable of and would like to do. She hurtles over them way higher than she needs to, and gets very overexcited. Because I'm so scared of smashing my post-menopausal bones to bits by falling off over big jumps, Darcy pretends they're bigger, in order to have some fun.

The trainer put a metre jump up the other week and asked how I felt about it, then, as I grimaced, he put it down to two foot and gratefully I cantered round in a circle and flew over. The fact that Darcy still jumped a metre in the air didn't bother me.

But if going to competitions and actually jumping a metre – with the pole in the metre position – means pumping her full of flu vaccine on a six-monthly basis, then I'm less motivated than ever to do it.

What do you expect from an anti-vaxxer? We are all horribly selfish, as you know. We are also somewhat paranoid.

I'm sure all my fully vaccinated friends look very well and are proving to be very strong and resilient, being as free from coughs and colds and Covid as a person with a fortified immune system should be. The fact I don't particularly notice that is indicative, no doubt, of my problem, my mental block, my belligerence.

The builder boyfriend is the same. He went up to the Waitrose garage for a chicken the other day and came back to report he had just run into two friends of ours who we haven't seen for ages and he was shocked by how awful they looked.

'What do you mean?' I asked. And he started to explain. And I began to worry that he and I are becoming delusional, seeing things that are not there.

I'm sure everyone is absolutely fine and everything is precisely as it should be. Of course, I'm a fool for not having it. And now I'm extending that pig-headedness to deprive my horses of the chance of a twice-yearly flu jab just because the vet admitted that in terms of their health it was enough to have them done annually.

'He's a therapy dog.'

Bridge

Janet de Botton

It seems ironic that while many bridge players are fighting to 'Keep Bridge Alive', raising money to encourage and teach the next generation of potential enthusiasts, the English Bridge Union seems to be doing the exact opposite. They have just cut the funding for sending Juniors to championships – crucial to the development of their game – and not because lockdown has left them decimated. They have relocated the funds to further support our Ladies and Senior teams – many of whom are professionals or sponsors – while most of the Juniors are still in education. Go figure.

Here is 17-year-old Sam Anoyrkatis playing and winning for England in the recent Junior Camrose.

Dealer South **E/W vulnerable**

	♠ A Q 9 ♥ J 8 ♦ J 9 7 5 3 ♣ A10 3	
♠ 8 ♥ 9 5 3 2 ♦ Q10 4 ♣ K 9 8 5 4	N W E S	♠ K J 10 7 6 5 4 2 ♥ A ♦ A 8 6 ♣ J
	♠ 3 ♥ K Q 10 7 6 4 ♦ K 2 ♣ Q 7 6 2	

West	North	East	South
			1♥
Pass	2♦	3♠	Pass
Pass	3NT	Pass	4♥
All Pass			

West led his Spade and Sam won the Ace and called for the Jack of trumps. East won and played a middle Spade which Declarer ruffed and was probably surprised when West overruffed. West played a Diamond to partner's Ace, but the next Spade Sam could ruff high and draw trumps. Before he took his last trump, however, he went into the tank.

Even looking at all the hands it's not easy to see that the contract can make, but Sam worked it out at the table; the only chance is that Diamonds are 3-3 and East has the singleton Jack of Clubs.

Sam placed the Queen of Clubs on the table! West covered with the King, the Ace winning and East dropped the Jack. Now Diamonds could be ruffed good and the last trump drawn. The ♣10 was the entry to the two good Diamonds.

All we are saying is... Give Kids a Chance.

As you know, when it comes to champagne, Pol Roger is pretty much *The Spectator*'s house pour. Indeed, a dog-eared sign on the door of the office fridge demands that staff always ensure there are two bottles chilling within it for emergency celebrations and commiserations or simply for whenever the moment strikes.

It's a rare occasion at 22 Old Queen Street when a bottle of Pol isn't broached, then, and the fabled *Spectator* summer party is fuelled by little else. But one can't live on Grande Marque Champagne alone and much as we adore PR, there are other effervescent treats out there that should not be ignored.

Away from the big names, Henri Chauvet and Brimoncourt always impress and remain two of my absolute favourite champagnes, neither of which I ever tire of recommending. To these two I would now like to add a third, a champagne hitherto unknown to me but one that I've fallen for in a big way and about which I'd love to tip you the wink.

Frerejean Frères was set up in Avize in the Côte des Blancs by brothers Guillaume, Richard and Rodolphe Frerejean-Taittinger, cousins to the champagne Taittingers and descendants of a long line of French cannon-makers, of all things. The boys started simply by making wine for family and friends until demand became so great that they set up in business officially in 2005.

Using the finest fruit sourced only from small parcels of Grand and Premier Cru vineyards, they have come a long way in a short time and have had critics and connoisseurs alike in a complete swoon.

You will find Frerejean Frères stocked and served in such swanky establishments as the Dorchester in London, Le Crillon in Paris, the Conrad in Tokyo and the Mercer in New York. Frerejean Frères is also the official champagne supplier to the 2022 Michelin Awards. We're talking absolute blue-chip here.

Happily for those of us riff-raff unlikely to be allowed through the doors of such august hostelries at least for long enough to grab a passing glass of champers, our partners, Honest Grapes, have kindly agreed to make two of FJF's fizzes available to *Spectator* readers at what HG's Nick Daniell promises me are the keenest prices around.

The Frerejean Frères Premier Cru Brut NV (1) is an equal blend of Chardonnay and Pinot Noir, with minimal dosage, aged for a minimum five years (far longer than the legal requirement of 15 months). With lively white stone fruit, fresh and baked apple, a hint of honey and touch of toasty brioche, it's absolutely on song, full and satisfying. One sip and I was smitten. It is astoundingly fine and

This is a champagne hitherto unknown to me, but one that I've fallen for in a big way

well worth the price which compares very favourably with what one pays for a Grande Marque. £36 down from £38.

And because we love you and want you to be happy as can be, I twisted Nick Daniell's arm and he has agreed to make half bottles and magnums available too at £21.50 (down from £23.50) and £80 (down from £82) respectively.

The Frerejean Frères Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru (2) is as tasty a champagne as I've had in yonks. Made from 100 per cent Côte des Blancs Chardonnay – largely from the 2013 vintage but using a sizeable proportion of reserve wines from 2010, 2011 and 2012 too – it's in peak condition. With intricate notes of toast, honey, butter, cream and mango, it's wonderfully stylish and satisfying (and comes in a gorgeously presented and packaged clear-glass bottle too). It's a serious alternative to such mighty wines as, say, Ruinart Blanc de Blancs, and considerably cheaper. Gosh it's good! £63 down from £65.

The mixed box has 3 bottles each of both wines and delivery, as ever, is free.

Join Jonathan Ray and Martin Vander Weyer on a tour of Champagne, 24-28 October, with Kirker Travel. For details visit club.spectator.co.uk/events

ORDER FORM *Spectator Wine Offer*

www.honestgrapes.co.uk/spectator
Honest Grapes, 141-157 Acre Lane, London SW2 5UA
Tel: 020 3603 1646; Email: help@honestgrapes.co.uk; www.honestgrapes.co.uk

		Prices in form are per case of 12, 6 or 3 as stated	*List price*	*Club price*	*No.*
Fizz	1	Frerejean Frères Premier Cru Brut NV, 12.5%, 6 x 75cl	~~£228.00~~	£216.00	
	2	FJF Premier Cru Brut NV, 12.5%, 12 x 37.5cl	~~£282.00~~	£258.00	
	3	FJF Premier Cru Brut NV, 12.5%, 3 x 150cl	~~£246.00~~	£240.00	
	4	Frerejean Frères Blanc de Blancs Premier Cru NV, 12.5%, 6 x 75cl	~~£390.00~~	£378.00	
Mixed	5	Mixed half-dozen, 6 x 75cl	~~£309.00~~	£297.00	

Mastercard/Visa no.

Start date Expiry date Sec. code

Issue no. Signature

Please send wine to

Name

Address

Postcode

Telephone

Email

Total

Prices include VAT and delivery on the British mainland. Payment should be made either by cheque with the order, payable to Honest Grapes Ltd, or by debit or credit card, details of which may be telephoned or faxed. This offer, which is subject to availability, closes on 4 June 2022.

Terms and conditions: This week's Wine Offer is managed by Honest Grapes. For full details on its T&Cs, email help@honestgrapes.co.uk
Contact permission: I would like to receive up to date offers and communications from Honest Grapes ☐
I would like to receive up to date offers and communications from other carefully selected organisations ☐

Food
Into the labyrinth
Tanya Gold

I am never bored with Harrods, only disgusted, and it is disgust of the most animated and exciting kind. It is Nabokov's fish-tank of a department store, but with lampshades, not hebephilia. Its wares have surpassed its beginnings, which were haberdashery. Charles Harrod's first shop was at 228 Borough High Street when George IV, who would love Harrods, was king. His second was at Stepney. Harrod came west for the Great Exhibition of 1851 and now we have this: the most crazed example of a crazed aesthetic, which is imperial Edwardian. Or Disney pinnacles the colour of blood. Harrods used to have a boutique in which almost-normal children could be transformed into Disney princesses. I await the cryonics department with ecstasy.

That Harrods is now owned by Qatar Investment Authority is surely a mad kind of justice, and its motto Omnia Omnibus Ubique ('All things for all people, everywhere') is such bald fiction I am impressed. I don't shop here, of course – I can't afford it – but I come to do my favourite thing, which is laughing at rich people's taste. You can take the measure of their lives, or lack thereof; Asma al-Assad bought a fondue set. There is always something new to make your eyeballs fizz. Today I am mesmerised by a Christian Dior skateboard and a pair of Prada table-tennis bats. I don't bother to note the prices. It would make my fists itch.

I come to Harrods to do my favourite thing, which is laughing at rich people's taste

Harrods must disembody itself or it would fail on its own terms. It's a shopping mall, not a place, and shopping malls must not be connected to the earth. If they were then no one would buy anything, for isn't the earth by itself enough? And a shopping mall must have restaurants to succour the almost-human shopper because wanting things is exhausting. I have yet to eat a good meal in Harrods, so this column is an act of hope. Hope is cheap. It has a caviar house, a coffee house, a burger restaurant with Gordon Ramsay's name attached to it – does he know? – a grill, a café, a tearoom, a pizzeria and a chip shop.

'That'll be 8,300 calories.'

Now there is a restaurant called Em Sherif, 'proud flag bearers of Lebanese culture', which is superb, and doesn't need it. It is a small bright room at the edges of menswear, which is a labyrinth, surely by design: if you cannot get out of menswear, you may find yourself buying an A.A. Gill-themed velvet bathrobe for £3,000. It is the first Em Sherif in Europe, and I don't think I have ever been anywhere that felt more transient, including an airport.

Any restaurant in Harrods is at a terrible disadvantage. It can be as mad as Harrods itself, which I would like to see – Daniel Humm or Thomas Keller could set themselves up with diamond cutlery and nudity and papier-mâché forests – or it can simper at the edges, gawping, as I do. Em Sherif does this: it is plain for Knightsbridge, despite fine tiling. We eat flatbread with spiced beef and pine nuts (£16!); tabbouleh; hummus; labneh; not wagyu hummus (£46!); kibbeh sajiyeh and falafel.

It is, to use my favourite adjective, adequate, because no matter your passion in northern Europe, it is easier to find a Prada table-tennis bat than a good tomato. It is not as fine as you would find in Shepherd Market – a market without a shepherd, or a market – and not nearly as good as you would find on any street corner in Lebanon. Harrods, in its mad way, never disappoints me: that's why I always come back. Perhaps one day you will be able to buy a full-sized nation state here. For now, I come out cheering.

Em Sherif at Harrods, 87-135 Brompton Road, London SW1X 7XL; emsherifrestaurant.co.uk

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE

Salmagundi

'It makes me hungry,' said my husband when I mentioned the word *salmagundi*. That is his reaction to many words. But he liked the sound of it.

I think in its sound, suggestive of something impossible to pin down, it resembles *serendipity*. The obscure French original of *salmagundi*, a dish of chopped up meat and whatnot, must have become known in English through Rabelais's gluttonous epic. Thomas Urquhart's translation of 1653 speaks of the 'Lairdship of Salmigondin'. Various rationalising respellings emerged, such as Sallad-Magundy (1710). *Salad*, by origin something salty,

was not limited to raw greenery. 'Sallet,' wrote Randle Holme, the herald painter, 'is either Sweet Herbs, or Pickled Fruits, or Cucumbers, Samphire, Elder-Buds, Broom-Buds, &c. eaten with Roasted Meats.'

In Samuel Foote's comedy *The Patron* (1764) one character mentions *salmagundi* in a different form: 'By your account, I must be an absolute olio, a perfect salamongundy of charms.' That or *Solomon Gundy* were names for the dish in the 18th century, though their near relative *Solomon Grundy* (born on a Monday) was not seen in print till James Orchard Halliwell's *Nursery Rhymes* (1842).

Salmagundi proved popular as a title, chosen by the satirical poet George Huddesford for a collection in 1793. In 1807, Washington Irving, aged 23, started a periodical with friends called *Salmagundi; or, The Whim-Whams and Opinions of Launcelot Langstaff, Esq.*

In the same year as Foote's *Patron*, Thomas Warton edited *The Oxford Sausage: Select Poetical Pieces Written by the Most Celebrated Wits*. A later edition carried a portrait of Dorothy Spreadbury, renowned as the inventress of the edible Oxford sausage. By 1819 recipes were being published for Oxford sausages of pork and veal, but Warton was probably more aware of the inherent risibility of sausages, as Aristophanes was in making a sausage-seller the hero of his comedy *The Knights*.

In pursuing these salmagundis and sausages, I stumbled across a fabulous semantic engine, a sort of virtual sausage machine, about which I'd like to tell you next week. *– Dot Wordsworth*

THE SPECTATOR

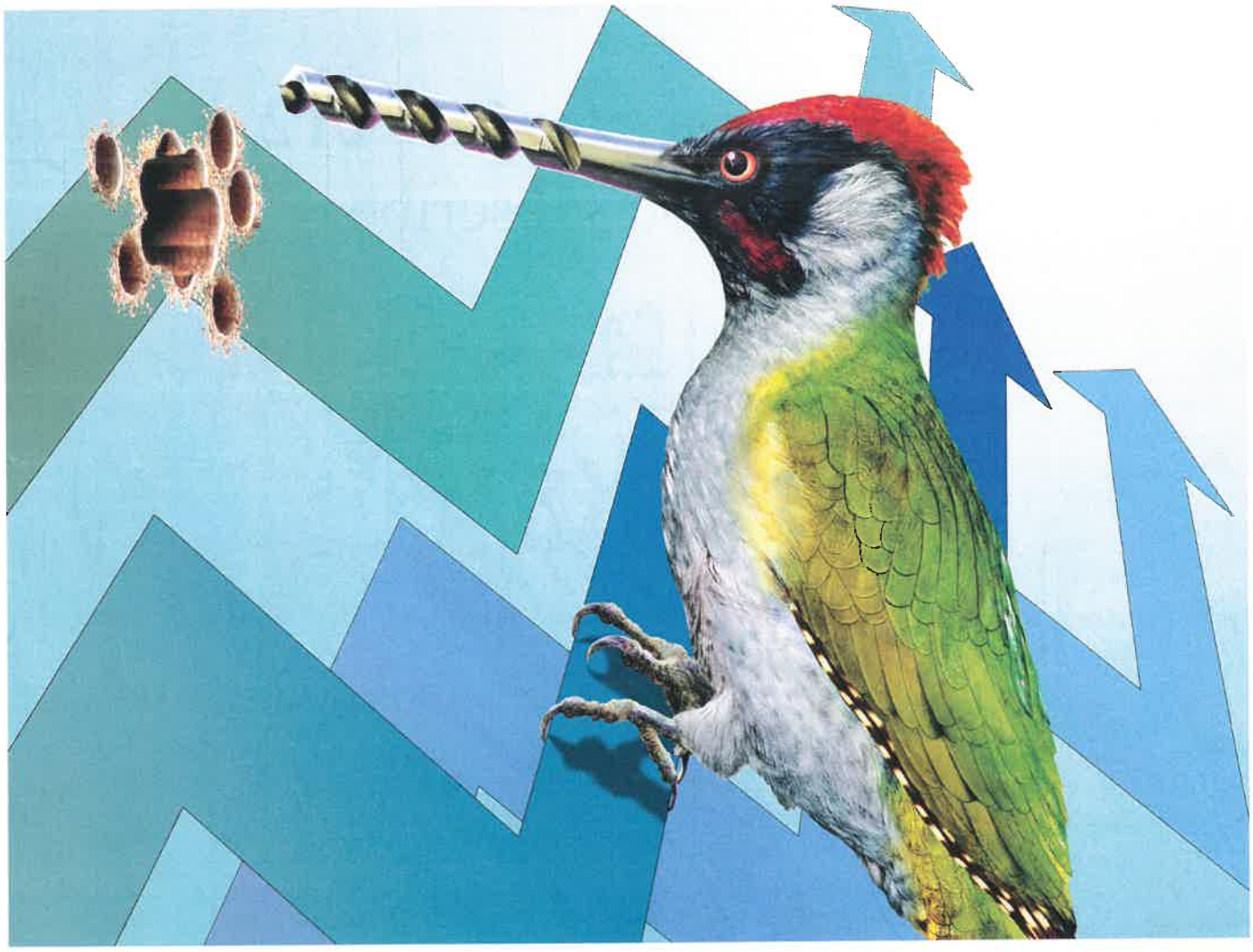
Try 12 weeks for **just £12** when you subscribe

Subscribe today and get the **next 12 issues of the magazine**, along with unlimited access to daily analysis on spectator.co.uk for just £12. That's only £1 a week.

spectator.co.uk/magoffer

FINDING COMPANIES WITH AN INNOVATIVE ADVANTAGE

Guinness Global Innovators Fund



We invest in companies using innovation to outperform. It is not just the tech giants, innovation exists in many industries including healthcare, consumer goods and robotics.

Find out more, visit the web address below or call 020 7222 5703.

◀ Lower risk		Risk & reward				Higher risk ▶
1	2	3	4	5	**6**	7
Typically lower rewards					Typically higher rewards	

guinnessgi.com/gif

POSITIVELY DIFFERENT

GUINNESS GLOBAL INVESTORS

This is a marketing communication. Please refer to the prospectus and KIID for the Fund, which are available on our website, before making any final investment decisions.

Risk: Past performance is not a guide to future returns. The value of this investment and any income arising from it can fall as well as rise as a result of market and currency fluctuations. You may not get back the amount you invested. The fund is actively managed with the MSCI World index used as a comparator benchmark only and invests in companies that the Investment Team view to be innovative. Guinness Global Investors is a trading name of Guinness Asset Management Ltd., which is authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority (223077). Calls will be recorded.